The Profoundest Problem of Ethics: About the Possibility of a Profound Solution

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THE PROFOUNDEST PROBLEM OF ETHICS:
ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF A PROFOUND SOLUTION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies

by

Pol Pardini Gispert
B.A., Universitat de Girona, 2001
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For my mother and father,

For as many books as I read, your actions are still my moral compass.
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Abstract

My thesis is concerned with the prospects for finding a solution to what Henry Sidgwick called the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. I begin by analysing Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* to reveal the assumptions about rationality that led Sidgwick to claim that Ethics is plagued with a profoundest problem. I then evaluate the capacity of seven accounts – those of Derek Parfit, Roger Crisp, David Brink, David Phillips, William Frankena, Owen McLeod, and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer – to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics; arguing that not one is able to solve it. In the conclusion, I indicate that the common problem that prevents all accounts, Sidgwick’s included, from solving the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is that they all share the assumptions about rationality that Sidgwick himself supposed in defining the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. I conclude suggesting that these assumptions are unsubstantiated, and I indicate that, when these unquestioned assumptions about rationality are rejected, what Sidgwick called the Profoundest Problem of Ethics comes into a new light in which a solution may not even be necessary.
Preface

Ethics is, for me and for many others, one of the most important areas of philosophy. Insofar as it studies what is right or what ought to be done, so far as this depends upon the voluntary action of individuals, it is one of the few areas of philosophy that may help us determine, in our everyday lives as well as in moments when we face momentous dilemmas, what is the right way to act: Should I treat myself to steak, if I know that a cow, a living being, will be killed for me and others to eat her? Should I save a stranger’s life, if by doing so I need to sacrifice my own legs? Ethics is supposed to illuminate these types of questions and help us determine what we ought to do in every such case.

But, what if we discovered that Ethics gives us contradictory answers to each of the questions that we submit for consideration? What if, by appealing to two different – but equally valid – rational procedures, we discovered that different actions that cannot be performed at the same time can both be regarded as equally right? Ethics would leave us, then, without knowing what we ought to do, and many would see this as a reason to disregard Ethics as a useless study.

Henry Sidgwick claimed in The Methods of Ethics (1907) that Ethics faces precisely this problem. He labeled it as “the Profoundest Problem of Ethics”. Sidgwick tried, without success, to find a solution to that problem. And many others have attempted the same since. In this thesis, I argue that eight distinguished philosophers who have attempted to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics have left the problem unresolved. In particular, I argue that all these philosophers, Sidgwick included, constrained by their unquestioned acceptance of certain assumptions that Sidgwick himself established when he discovered the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, have omitted what truly makes the Profoundest Problem of Ethics profound. This is why, I argue, they all have left the problem unresolved.
Writing this thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of my advisor, Professor Husain Sarkar. First, he gave me orientation when my thought was unbridled with many indefinite ideas. By suggesting an extensive, careful, and systematic examination of Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics*, he compelled me to find the presuppositions underlying the Profoundest Problem of Ethics; the acceptance of which, I would discover, was the reason why Sidgwick’s problem remained unresolved. Second, Professor Sarkar provided me with insightful and rigorous comments – about my ideas, arguments, structure, and about my often broken English – every time that he revised my manuscripts, which were more than many. Finally, when a solid amount of work had been done, Professor Sarkar stimulated me to unleash, again, my thought and present well-considered objections to the various solutions I have presented; appealing to the – now definite – ideas that motivated me to write this thesis in the first place. I feel privileged to have had him as my advisor, and I will be always thankful for all the time he dedicated to me.

I also want to express my gratitude to the members of my committee, Professors Jeffrey Roland and Raff Donelson. Professor Roland provided me with meticulous remarks that helped me choose every word with uttermost care, making sure that they were all properly defined. He also gave me unforgettable advice about how to be clear and precise in my prose. Professor Donelson, on the other hand, enabled me to understand the framework to which I, unknowingly, had subscribed in my thesis. This allowed me to foresee possible objections against my arguments; accordingly, it made my thesis more defensible and robust. Without them, this master’s thesis would have been poorer. Finally, I want to thank Louisiana State University, and in particular its Department of Philosophy, for giving me the opportunity to study for the Master of Arts’ degree in Philosophy. When I was a child in Girona, I conceived the possibility of studying in the United States only in my wildest dreams. Thanks to the Department of Philosophy, now other wild dreams occupy my mind. Hopefully, these too will be replaced by even wilder dreams in the future.
Introduction

When one encounters Henry Sidgwick’s renowned declaration to have found the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, for which he himself was not able to find a solution, one finds oneself with dual sentiments: on the one hand, one is curious about how Sidgwick arrived at this deep problem, and on the other hand, one has the urge to attempt to solve the problem that Sidgwick found. Surprisingly, well-known authors approaching Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics*, where Sidgwick presents the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, seem to me to take only one of the two following alternatives: they either take seriously Sidgwick’s claim that Ethics is plagued by a profoundest problem, but they do not give a proper solution to the problem; or, they understand the Profoundest Problem in a particular – in my view, watered-down – way that affords them a solution – a solution that does not do full justice to Sidgwick’s original problem.\(^1\) No one actually seems to solve the original, Profoundest Problem of Ethics when taken in its full force.

The Profoundest Problem of Ethics, as described by Sidgwick, expresses the conflict between two different theories, *Rational Egoism* and *Rational Benevolence*, insofar as they yield contradictory dictates about what human beings ought to do – what is right for them to do.\(^2\) Sidgwick argues that Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence are definite forms of rational procedures that are already implicit in the common moral reasoning – Practical Reason – of human beings. However, Sidgwick claims, in what he calls the *Fundamental Postulate of Ethics*, that if two rational procedures yield conflicting conclusions, they cannot both be valid. (6) The problem arises because Sidgwick is not able to show that either Rational Egoism or Rational Benevolence

\(^1\) I cite any page ‘n’ of *The Methods of Ethics* as (n). All other references follow the author-date referencing system. Here, I try to explain Sidgwick’s background without imposing a particular, non-Sidgwickian interpretation of it.

\(^2\) Sidgwick understands ‘right’ and ‘ought’ as equivalent terms; duty, as Sidgwick’s understands it, refers to all right acts.
can be rejected or modified; thus, he has to conclude that different valid rational procedures yield conflicting conclusions – violating the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics.

Insofar as these rational procedures are implicit in our moral reasoning, the reliability of Practical Reason itself is at stake in the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence. This is why Sidgwick named the problem that he found *the* Profoundest Problem of Ethics: because the apparently intuitive operation of Practical Reason – rationally determining what we ought to do – would be revealed as illusory if we discovered that the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence cannot be resolved – as Sidgwick could not. In that case, we would need to decide what we ought to do relying only on non-rational impulses. (508)

Sidgwick’s conclusion that Ethics is plagued with a profoundest problem relies on three unquestioned assumptions that act as key premises of an argument underlying Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics*.

Sidgwick’s argument – from now on, *Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument* – is:

1. **Principle of Practical Reason’s Authority:** Ethics is plagued with a profoundest problem if and only if human beings cannot always trust Practical Reason in determining what they ought to do.
2. **Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability:** Human beings can always trust Practical Reason in determining what they ought to do *if and only if* the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is not violated.
3. **Fundamental Postulate of Ethics:** If two valid rational procedures yield different principles, then these principles must not practically or theoretically conflict.
4. Two valid rational procedures yield different principles.
5. The principles theoretically conflict.
6. The principles practically conflict.
Therefore:

(7) The Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is violated.

(8) We cannot always trust Practical Reason in determining what we ought to do.

(9) Ethics is plagued with a profoundest problem.

I call the set of three assumptions that constitute the three key premises of Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument – namely, (1) the Principle of Practical Reasons’ Authority, (2) the Principle of Practical Reasons’ Reliability, and (3) the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics – *Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions*.

Keeping this in mind, the purpose of this thesis is threefold. First, I argue that it is precisely Sidgwick’s unquestioned acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions that constrains Sidgwick into a structure – namely, Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument – within which the Profoundest Problem of Ethics cannot be resolved. Second, I argue that eight of the philosophers who have attempted to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics also accept Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. This is the reason why, I argue, these philosophers follow only one of the two alternatives stated in the first paragraph. Insofar as they accept Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, the only way they have to approach Sidgwick’s Profoundest Problem of Ethics is to either conceive the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence in a way in which either the principles or the rational procedures do not really conflict – in that case, either (4), (5), or (6) in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument would be false –; or to fail, with Sidgwick, to offer a solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. Third, I argue that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is still waiting for a profound solution, and I suggest that this solution can only be articulated if one rejects Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions.

This thesis is divided into five parts, including the Introduction. In Chapter 1, I provide the necessary conceptual background to understand why Sidgwick concludes *The Methods of Ethics*
with the claim that Ethics is faced with the Profoundest Problem. This first chapter is crucial: without either the conceptual background of *The Methods of Ethics*, or understanding the order of Sidgwick’s reasoning, it is impossible to reveal Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument, and therefore, it is also impossible to appreciate how Sidgwick’s acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions limits Sidgwick’s possibility to offer a solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics.

In Chapter I, I also illustrate that Sidgwick devotes almost all the chapters of *The Methods of Ethics* to show that the antecedent of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics – clause (4) in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument – is true: that is, that two valid rational procedures – namely, Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence – yield different principles. In this first chapter, I focus primarily on material in Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics*; although I occasionally appeal to Sidgwick’s article “Some Fundamental Ethical Controversies”.

In Chapter 2, I focus exclusively on the Profoundest Problem of Ethics as Sidgwick presents it in the last chapter of *The Methods of Ethics*. In this chapter, I claim, Sidgwick argues that the consequent of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics – clauses (5) and (6) in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument – is false: that is, that the principles yielded respectively by Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence do theoretically and practically conflict. This is enough for Sidgwick to conclude that there is indeed a Profoundest Problem of Ethics. I argue that Sidgwick’s conclusion can only be properly understood in terms of Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument.

First, relying tacitly on the conditions of the truth of the conditional expressed in the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics – (3) –, and having shown that the antecedent of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is true – (4) –, and the consequent is false – (5) and (6) –, Sidgwick assumes that – (7) – the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is violated. Second, relying implicitly on the conditions of truth of the biconditional expressed in the Principle of Practical Reasons’ Reliability – (2) –, and once he has shown that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is indeed violated, Sidgwick
deduces – (8) – that we cannot always trust our moral reasoning in determining what we ought to do. Third, relying on the conditions of the truth of the biconditional expressed in the Principle of Practical Reasons’ Authority – (1) –, and assuming that we cannot always trust Practical Reason, Sidgwick concludes that – (9) – Ethics is indeed plagued with a profoundest problem. This is precisely Sidgwick’s conclusion to *The Methods of Ethics*.

In Chapter 2, I also introduce five distinctions that will be useful in Chapter 3 in framing possible interpretations of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. These distinctions are: the distinction between what *Sidgwick said* and what *Sidgwick ought to have said*; the distinction between *Internalism* and *Externalism*; the distinction between the *rationalist’s* and the *moralist’s* problem; the distinction between *conflict-enhancing* and *conflict-mitigating* interpretations of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics; and, lastly, the difference between (a) agent-relative, temporally-neutral, theories, (b) agent-relative, present-biased theories, and (c) person-neutral, temporally-neutral, theories.³

In Chapter 3, I explain, relying on the aforementioned distinctions, what I call the ‘classical interpretations’ of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, along with the solutions, and displaying the relationship between how they can be categorized using such distinctions and the respective solutions they provide. In particular, I explain the attempt to solve Sidgwick’s Profoundest Problem of Ethics by eight philosophers: William Frankena, David Brink, Derek Parfit, Owen McLeod, David Phillips, Roger Crisp, and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer.⁴ I argue that each of these philosophers implicitly accepts Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. To show this, I use the conceptual distinctions mentioned above to categorize each of their interpretations in a way that demonstrates that either they fail to offer a solution to the Profoundest Problem, or they make

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³ I explain these notions in 2.1.1 Five fundamental distinctions.
⁴ Lazari-Radek and Singer offer a solution together in *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*. 
certain conceptual compromises that enable them to show that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is not violated. By doing so, I argue, they – at best – solve only their watered-down interpretation of Sidgwick’s problem but not the original Profoundest Problem of Ethics itself.

In Chapter 3, I also offer two different types of objections against the classical interpretations. On the one hand, I provide particular objections against the arguments of the aforesaid authors, to show that some of the premises, proofs, or conclusions are not sound. On the other hand, I argue that, even if their arguments are sound, not one of their arguments achieve the purpose that they intend: solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. I argue that their shared problem is that, constrained by their acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, their options to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics are limited to begin with. Finally, I try to show that the particular problems which their arguments incur – which I attack in my first objections – are caused by the presuppositions they share with Sidgwick – which I attack in my second objections.

Keeping this in mind, two points need to be made here. First, it is important here to clarify that my interests in this thesis are not primarily exegetical, but philosophical. My objections do not attack a solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics for not being plausibly Sidgwickian, only for not taking Sidgwick sufficiently seriously; that is, for not understanding Sidgwick in a way that those philosopher’s interpretations of the problem provide a philosophically profound solution to a problem that, as its name demands, deserves a solution with a certain depth and substance.

Second, it is important to say a few words about why I have chosen these seven different attempts to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics and not others. As some readers might have already realized, all the philosophers that I study in this thesis come from the same tradition: Utilitarianism. As I explain in Chapter 1, Sidgwick believes that Rational Benevolence coincides with Utilitarianism. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics, then, as Sidgwick understands it, expresses the
conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism. It is not surprising that some of the most renowned authors that have attempted to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics – to the benefit of Utilitarianism – are, then, utilitarians. But, let us not be mistaken. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics transcends the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism.⁵

In the Conclusions, I argue that Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions need to be rejected if one wants to provide a profound solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. I argue, first, that the relations expressed respectively by the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics and the Principle of Practical Reasons’ Reliability need to be scrutinized. While I argue that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is relying on a dubious comparison between mathematics and ethics, I also argue that it is not clear that, if the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is violated, it follows that we cannot always trust Practical Reason.

Finally, I argue that, when we reject the assumptions that Sidgwick and the classical interpretations share, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is cast in a new light. Even when the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence is understood in its full force, the conflict does not appear as an unsolvable problem but as what may be, for all we know, an inherently human trait; that our Practical Reason may yield conflicting dictates about what we ought to do. Once this is accepted, the solution to the Profoundest Problem Ethics does not depend on satisfying our unquestioned demand about what we would like our Practical Reason to be, but about being conscious that our acts can always be judged to be wrong from either the perspective of Rational Egoism or Rational Benevolence. I finish my thesis suggesting that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics does not cast doubt upon the authority of Practical Reason. It is instead our initial situation as ethical beings.

⁵ In Chapter 1, 1.2.3 Utilitarianism, I argue that Rational Benevolence and Utilitarianism do not necessarily coincide.
Chapter 1. Background to Sidgwick’s Profoundest Problem of Ethics

The Profoundest Problem of Ethics is silently pervading most of Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics*, but it is not until Book III, when almost two-thirds of the treatise have already been written, that Sidgwick discloses the Profoundest Problem of Ethics for the first time in a note to Chapter XIII of Book III, ‘Philosophical Intuitionism’.6 (386n) After this brief reference, it is not until the last chapter that Sidgwick actually presents his full account of the problem. But, before I begin explaining the Profoundest Problem, it is important to understand how Sidgwick arrives at this formulation in the first place. This is why I organize this chapter into two parts. First, corresponding to Book I of *The Methods of Ethics*, I outline the conceptual background necessary to understand Sidgwick, defining and explaining the following notions: Ethics, method of ethics, Fundamental Postulate of Ethics, Practical Reason, Duty, pleasure, desire, moral motivation and voluntary action. Also, I present Sidgwick’s explicit purpose in his treatise. Second, corresponding to Books II, III, and IV, I explain what Sidgwick considers the three methods of ethics, while delineating his main arguments in each of these books.

1.1. Conceptual background

This section attempts to provide the conceptual background necessary to discuss the Profoundest Problem of Ethics carefully, extensively, and systematically. It might be useful to start by giving two key definitions. According to Sidgwick:

\[
\text{Ethics: } \quad \text{[S]cience or study of what is right or what ought to be, so far as this depends upon the voluntary action of individuals. (4)}
\]

6 In the note, Sidgwick claims: “On the relation of Rational Egoism to Rational Benevolence – which I regard as the profoundest problem of Ethics – my final view is given in the last chapter of this treatise”. (386)
Method of Ethics: Any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings ‘ought’ – or what it is ‘right’ for them – to do, or to seek to realize by voluntary action. (1)

Sidgwick, in the “Introduction” of *The Methods of Ethics*, claims that the object of his work is not *primarily* to discover or determine ethical first principles nor to “supply a set of practical directions for conduct”. (14) Instead, his aim is to “expound as clearly and as fully as [his] limits will allow the different methods of Ethics that [he] find[s] implicit in our common moral reasoning; to point out their mutual relations; and where they seem to conflict, to define the issue as much as possible”. (14) A few pages earlier, Sidgwick claims “that the plan of the … treatise is” to give an explanation to the phenomenon that human beings, while they never ask, ‘Why should I believe what I see to be true?’, they tend to ask, ‘Why should I do what I see to be right?’ (5, 6) In Sidgwick’s view, only the fact that we find different methods of Ethics implicit in our common moral reasoning, “not brought into clear relation to each other,” can give an explanation to this phenomenon that separates ethics from, for example, mathematics. (6) According to Sidgwick, it is precisely because there are, in our common moral reasoning, different rational procedures by which we determine what we ought to do, or to seek to realize by voluntary action, that “any single answer to the question ‘why’ will not be completely satisfactory, as it will be given only from one of these points of view, and will always leave room to ask the question from some other”. (6)

Sidgwick’s object is, then, to study all different methods implicit in our moral reasoning to describe *(a)* what is determined as right from each rational procedure, *(b)* how these determinations relate to each other, and *(c)* if they conflict, to define the conflict as much as possible, hoping that at least one of these determinations will be able to be modified or rejected.

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7 I come back to Sidgwick’s comparison between Ethics and mathematics in the Conclusions.
Sidgwick’s object in *The Methods of Ethics* can only be understood in terms of an assumption that structurally underlies Sidgwick’s approach to Ethics. Sidgwick explicitly assumes:

**Fundamental Postulate of Ethics:** “We cannot … regard as valid reasonings that lead to conflicting conclusions;” as “so far as two methods conflict, one or other of them must be modified or rejected”. (6)

Sidgwick does not explicitly justify his appeal to such Fundamental Postulate of Ethics. However, he suggests that it is rooted in his own conception of rationality and in the relation between reasons and rightness. According to Sidgwick, insofar as the notions right and ought cannot be conceptually divided into simpler notions, they cannot be conceptually defined. (32-33) Instead, they “can only be made clearer by determining as precisely as possible [their] relation to other notions with which [they] are connected in ordinary thought”. (33) Only in this indirect way can we understand their meaning without necessity of a proper definition. From Chapters II, III, IV, and V of Book I, we can define *five* notions that allow us to understand what it means for an action to be *right* or *seeking to realize what ought to be*.\(^8\)

(i) **Rationality**

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\(^8\) The notions are: rationality, moral motivation, disinterest, free will, and individuality. From the five notions that we can define to understand what it means for an action to be right, rationality is the notion with a stronger “connection,” in Sidgwick’s terms, with rightness. This might be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, the connection between rationality and rightness allows us to *intuitively* understand what it means for Sidgwick for an action to be right; on the other hand, as rationality cannot be divided into simpler notions, it cannot be conceptually defined either. This is why we need to appeal to the other four concepts to understand what it means for Sidgwick to an action to be right.
Sidgwick claims that *rightness* and *rationality* are interchangeable, *equivalent* notions. When we judge actions to be *right*, we always judge them as being reasonable or rational; similarly, if we judge that we *ought* to aim at some end, we judge that it is rational to do so. (23) On the other hand, if we judge that an action is reasonable or rational, we judge that we ought to act in that way, or that it is the right action to perform. Sidgwick, in this way, discards from the outset theories that explain the rightness of actions by appealing to *(a)* moral sentiments, *(b)* conformance to moral sentiments of other human beings, *(c)* penalties imposed by the machine of Law of a society and *(d)* penalties imposed by God. (27, 28 29, 31) Sidgwick, then, establishes a fundamental relation between Ethics and rationality.

Keeping this in mind, Sidgwick defines:

**Practical Reason:** Faculty “of [ethical] cognition”. (34)

**Duty:** [Refers to all R]ight acts, for the adequate performance of which a moral motive is at least occasionally necessary.⁹ (xxxi)

It is important here to clarify that in Book I, Sidgwick is not yet displaying his sympathy for the kinds of theories of rationality that claim that, other things equal, the rationality – and rightness – of an action is proportional to the value the action would produce in terms of welfare. For now, Sidgwick is just appealing to an intuitive notion of rationality that he will not scrutinize until Book III named “Intuitionism”.

Under this formal notion of rationality, Sidgwick contrasts rationality with non-rational – but not necessarily irrational – impulses. Let us imagine a person in Pisa, Italy and she is lactose

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⁹ Sidgwick differentiates the notions of ‘Duty’ and ‘Virtue’. While Duty comprehends exclusively Right acts, Virtue includes “the performance of duties as well as praise-worthy acts that are thought to go beyond strict duty, and that may even go beyond the power of some to perform”. (xxxi)
intolerant. She is brought by a friend to one of the best pizzerias of the city, *Il Montino*. It is possible to imagine that not-rational impulses would compel her to eat pizza. Still, what it is rational for her to do, considering her own health condition, is *to not* eat pizza. To not eat pizza would be, then, the rational action.

(ii) Moral motivation

The example above does not explain Sidgwick’s appeal to the relation between rationality, rightness, and Duty, and a special kind of motives: moral motivations. To understand this relation, it is necessary to provide an exegetical remark. Sidgwick uses the notion morality in two different senses throughout the *Methods of Ethics*: in a *wider* and in a *narrower* sense. In the wider sense, the word ‘moral’ has an equivalent meaning to the word ‘ethical’. In the narrower sense, the word ‘moral’ qualifies the method of ethics that Sidgwick calls Rational Benevolence.\(^\text{10}\) When Sidgwick claims that the performance of right acts needs to be caused by a moral motive, I understand that Sidgwick is using the word ‘moral’ in its wider sense. In this sense, Sidgwick is just claiming, when appealing to *moral motivation*, that the recognition through reason of the rightness of an action gives a certain type of impulse – ethical – to perform such an action:

> I speak of the cognition or judgment that ‘X ought to be done’ … as a ‘dictate’ or ‘precept’ of reason …[to]… imply that in rational beings as such this cognition gives an impulse or motive to action: though in human beings, of course, this is only one motive among others which are liable to conflict with it. (34)

According to Sidgwick, then, to recognize an act as right is to recognize a dictate of reason to perform that act, recognizing it as a dictate to follow. Although Sidgwick admits that some

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\(^\text{10}\) I borrow this distinction from Maudemarie Clark’s Introduction to *On the Genealogy of Morality*. (Nietzsche 1998: xviii) These two uses of the word ‘moral’ have created some exegetical controversies. See: (Brink 1988; and Phillips 2011: 136-139)
human beings might claim that they do not “find in their conscious any such unconditional or
categorial imperative” imposed by Reason, Sidgwick claims that the “notion of moral obligation”,
or Duty, cannot be understood without appealing to such dictates. (35) Sidgwick suggests that
Ethics is not apprehensible for beings who are not conscious of moral motives.

(iii) Disinterest

Sidgwick uses the term ‘disinterested’ to specify that actions conforming to Duty are
prompted by a special kind of moral motive that gives a certain impulse to the realization of right
actions. Sidgwick does so for two reasons. First, he leaves room, if I may use this expression, for
motives that are not always directed to our own pleasure. (45) This is crucial for Sidgwick’s treatise
because, as we will see, at least one method of ethics will aim at universal, and not particular,
happiness or pleasure.11 To understand why Sidgwick claims that not all motives are directed to
our own pleasure, it is first necessary to understand how Sidgwick defines pleasure and desire:

Pleasure: Kind of feeling, which includes “all kinds of agreeable … feelings” (120-
121) and “which stimulates the will to actions tending to sustain or pro-
duce it”. (42)

Desire: Felt volitional stimulus. (43)

If pleasure is all kinds of feelings that stimulate desire to sustain or generate such feelings
in question, one might be tempted to think that all desires are actually directed to our own pleasure,
ruling out the possibility of an altruistic method of ethics. Sidgwick believes this is not so: “it

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11 Sidgwick uses both terms with “equally comprehensible meanings”. (120)
appears to me that throughout the whole scale of my impulses, sensual, emotional, and intellectual alike, I can distinguish desires of which the object is something other than my own pleasure”. (45)

The second reason Sidgwick includes disinterestedness as a characteristic of right actions is to differentiate moral motives from other “non-rational” desires. (23) Sidgwick suggests that one is morally motivated to act as Practical Reason requires because the capacity itself to grasp the dictates of Practical Reason rationally binds one to perform in that way. In this sense, right actions are impelled by our obedience to Practical Reason, and not by subjective – interested – emotions or feelings. To hold that an action is right, it is not just to say that I feel it this way, for someone could feel differently; it is to claim that such action is really [that is, objectively] right.12

(27)

(iv) Free will

According to Sidgwick, an action, to be judged as right or wrong, needs to be voluntary. Sidgwick claims: “what we judge ‘ought to be’ done, is always thought capable of being brought about by the volition of any individual to whom the judgment applies”. (33) Sidgwick defines two conditions for an action to be considered voluntary and thus an object of moral approval or disapproval. It needs to be: (a) conscious, and (b) intending some particular result. (59, 60) If this is so, we can define a voluntary action as follows:

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12 This will be clearer in section 1.2.1 Intuitionism. Sidgwick claims that the dictates of Practical Reason are self-evident. And it is precisely our capacity to perceive the dictates of Practical Reason as self-evident that binds us – namely, morally motivate us – to act as Practical Reason requires. I borrow this way to understand Sidgwick’s conception of moral motivation from Peter Singer. (Singer 2015: 81-83)
Voluntary action: Voluntary actions are “distinguished as ‘conscious’ from actions or movements of human organism which are ‘unconscious’ or ‘mechanical’” (59) and “objects of moral approval or disapproval” when the “results of a man’s volitions” are “intended”.13 (60)

(v) Individuality

Sidgwick, both in the definition of method of ethics and that of ethics, includes the word ‘individual’ to characterize right actions. Sidgwick’s aim in doing so is to differentiate Ethics from Politics. (1)

Ethics aims at determining what ought to be done by individuals, while Politics aims at determining what the government of a state or political state ought to do and how it ought to be constituted. (15)

In other words, Ethics and Politics direct the dictates that they determine as right – and rational – to different types of subjects: while the ethical subjects are human beings taken individually, the political subjects are the governments of the States.14

Now, Sidgwick conceives human beings as temporally extended, numerically distinct, entities that correspond with our commonsensical notion of person. (Sidgwick 1981: 483) In fact, philosophers such as David Brink and Derek Parfit have indicated that Sidgwick grounds his conception of identity in what John Findlay labeled as the separateness of persons.15 (Findlay 1961:

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13 Sidgwick disregards Determinism because it adopts a point of view that is irrelevant to Ethics. Determinism concerns itself with defining “what the future actions of ourselves or others will be,” but not with “endeavoring to ascertain (...) what choice it is reasonable to make between two alternatives of present conduct;” only the latter concerns Ethics. (70)

14 This does not mean that there are not important connections between Ethics and Politics. Ethics, for example, needs to “determine the grounds and limits of obedience to Government”. (17) Ethics is related to Politics only inasmuch as it needs to determine what human beings ought to do or seek to realize in a world in which societies are politically organized. (22)

15 Parfit claims that the separateness persons is regarded as a fundamental fact of Ethics. (Parfit 2011: 133) To be clear, Sidgwick actually indicates that this conception of identity can be challenged by conceptions
The separateness of persons expresses the fact that a human being’s life has a unity throughout time that requires the human being to be regarded, as a whole, as only one and the same person throughout her life. Ethics, then, has these persons as its subjects.

Keeping the notions explained above in mind, we can now understand why Sidgwick is interested in examining the different methods of Ethics present in our common moral reasoning, as well as studying how they relate to each other, and whether they conflict. If Sidgwick finds, when analyzing our common moral reasoning, that insofar as two methods of ethics conflict and Practical Reason dictates that it is rational to act in two ways that are contradictory, we would find ourselves with contradictory moral motives for action. In other words, we would find ourselves as rationally pulled in different directions at the same time, and we could not appeal to Practical Reason to determine which direction we ought to follow. Insofar as Practical Reason could not give us a determinate answer, Sidgwick assumes that the conflict between different methods of ethics – rational procedures – would cast a long shadow on the reliability of Practical Reason and, by extension, on the validity of the conflicting methods themselves. This is why, I believe, Sidgwick assumes that it needs to be a fundamental postulate of Ethics that if “two methods of ethics conflict, one or other of them must be modified or rejected”. (6) Otherwise, in Sidgwick’s eyes, we will lose our trust in our Practical Reason; and ethics will be in a profoundest problem.

Sidgwick assumes, then, that there is a necessary relationship between the satisfaction of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics and the possibility to always trust our Practical Reason. I call this assumption the Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability. Similarly, Sidgwick assumes that

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that, following David Hume, maintain that “the Ego is merely a system of coherent phenomena, that the permanent identical ‘I’ is not a fact but a fiction”. (Sidgwick 1981: 419) However, Sidgwick did not want to pursue this challenge insofar as he thought that denying that the identity of persons persists in time would be too contrary to Common Sense. (Sidgwick 1981: 419, 498; also, Sidgwick 1889: 483)
if indeed we find that Practical Reason is not always reliable, then Ethics would be plagued with a profoundest problem. I call this assumption the Principle of Practical Reason’s Authority. I argue that, along with the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics, the Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability and the Principle of Practical Reason’s Authority structurally underlie The Methods of Ethics. I call the set of these three assumptions Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics arises because, in accepting Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, and in discovering that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is violated – two valid methods of ethics conflict –, Sidgwick concludes that we cannot trust our Practical Reason.

1.2. The Three Methods of Ethics

The Profoundest Problem of Ethics would not arise if: (i) there was only one method of ethics implicit in our common moral reasoning; (ii) there appeared to be different methods of ethics, they appeared to yield conflicting conclusions, but under closer examination, we discovered that one or both of the conflicting methods can be rejected or modified; or (iii) there were different methods implicit in our common moral reasoning, but they did not yield conflicting conclusions. The rest of this first chapter illustrates that, for Sidgwick, (i) and (ii) are false. In the next chapter – Chapter 2 – I explain that, according to Sidgwick, (iii) is also false.

In particular, Sidgwick claims there are three methods of ethics implicitly present in the common practical reasoning of human beings: Intuitionism, Rational Egoism, and Rational Benevolence. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics, as I explain in the next chapter, expresses the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence. However, before I explain the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, it is necessary to, first, explain why Sidgwick considers that there are only

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16 These options follow from the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics and the Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability.
these three methods of ethics and, then, analyze each of these methods of ethics in particular to understand to what extent Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence conflict.

First of all, though, it is important to clarify that, even though Sidgwick indeed believes that these three methods of ethics are present in our common moral reasoning, he does not claim that people conceive them as separate, distinct, methods. In the apparent cognitions that most human beings have “about rightness or reasonableness”, suggests Sidgwick, these three methods are simultaneously voicing – if I can use this expression – its dictates. (17) The task of the philosopher is precisely, then, to analytically distinguish these implicit methods and bring them under scrutiny to define the content and validity of their dictates.

Now, Sidgwick, in defining Ethics, implicitly introduces a difference between two types of actions that are commonly regarded as right: (a) actions that are right inasmuch as the performance of these actions appears rational in itself; and (b) actions that are right because they promote an end that is regarded as rational to promote.\(^{17}\) (78) Sidgwick derives the three methods of ethics from this distinction.

Regarding actions right in themselves, Sidgwick claims that there are certain unconditional rules that human beings see as rational to follow, apparently independently of the results that such actions might bring about. When human beings regard actions as right in themselves, Sidgwick claims that they are implicitly following a first method of ethics: namely, Intuitionism.

Regarding actions that are right because they promote an end that is rational to promote, Sidgwick explains that there are two ultimate ends which human beings commonly regard as ultimately reasonable to aim: Happiness and Perfection. (9) Although at the outset Sidgwick considers

\(^{17}\) I am aware that according to David Brink’s interpretation of Sidgwick, the Profoundest Problem is a conflict between a method constituting a rational theory and a method constituting a theory of morality. However, I agree with David Phillips that Brink’s claim is contrary to the basic textual evidence in The Methods of Ethics. (Brink 1988: 299; Phillips 2011: 137) Upon doing a careful analysis of The Methods of Ethics, I believe it is quite difficult to agree with Brink’s view.
Perfection itself as an end that human beings consider rational to promote – both their own Perfection and that of the whole of society – Sidgwick finally rejects it as a secondary end, that is: as an end which persons promote only to attain another end, which, as we will see when analyzing Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence, is Happiness.\(^{18}\) (395) Sidgwick, then, regards Happiness as the only end that human beings recognize as rational to be promoted in itself. Happiness, Sidgwick says, can be promoted universally and individually.

Precisely, when Happiness is taken as an end to be promoted for the individual, primarily benefiting himself, Sidgwick claims human beings follow a distinct method of ethics: namely, Rational Egoism.

Finally, when Happiness is taken, instead, as an end to be promoted universally, benefiting in this way the whole of a society, Sidgwick claims human beings are implicitly following another distinct method of ethics: namely, Rational Benevolence. According to Sidgwick, as I explain in the next section, Rational Benevolence coincides with the dictates of a particular ethical theory: namely, Utilitarianism.

According to Sidgwick, then, Intuitionism, Rational Egoism, and Utilitarianism are the three methods of ethics present in the ordinary practical thought of human beings when determining what they ‘ought’ – or what it is ‘right’ for them – to do or to seek to realize. Once Sidgwick has established that there are indeed these three methods of ethics, he analyzes the three methods to determine if they actually yield conflicting conclusions. I explain Sidgwick’s analysis in the next three sections. For now, let us give these three provisional definitions:

\(^{18}\) Although Lazari-Radek and Singer agree with Sidgwick’s claim, in Chapter 8 “Ultimate Good, Part I: Perfectionism and Desire-Based Theory” of The Point of View of the Universe, they show that Thomas Hurka and John Rawls have offered accounts of perfectionism that overcome Sidgwick’s objection. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 236-238)
Intuitionism: View of ethics which regards as the practically ultimate end of moral actions their conformity to certain rules or dictates of Duty unconditionally prescribed. (96)

Egoism: We must … understand by an Egoist a man who when two or more courses of action are open to him, ascertains … the amounts of pleasure and pain that are likely to result from each, and chooses the one which he thinks will yield him the greatest surplus of pleasure over pain. (121)

Utilitarianism: Ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole. (411)

1.2.1. Intuitionism

Sidgwick defines Intuitionism as the method of ethics that determines what human beings ought to do by appealing to certain rules that these persons conceive as right in themselves: that is, as rules that ought to be obeyed independently of the outcome that following these rules might bring about. Sidgwick indicates that there are two senses in which the term ‘intuitional’ is used. In a wider sense it refers to our capacity to judge immediately what ought to be done or aimed at. (97)

In this wider sense, the term ‘intuition’ can be applied to both the methods of Utilitarianism and Rational Egoism, as it merely appeals to our capacity of moral re-cognition, Practical Reason, with

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19 I start by the Intuitional Method, and not Rational Egoism as Sidgwick does it in The Methods of Ethics, because it will be much easier to explain Egoism as it is presented in the Profoundest Problem of Ethics when the Principle of Prudence, implied in Rational Egoism, has been “discovered” through the analysis of the Intuitional Method.
which we are able to cognize certain acts as right. In the *narrower sense* of the term ‘intuitional’, the Intuitional Method refers to the capacity “of seeing clearly that certain kinds of action are right and reasonable in themselves, apart from their consequences”. (200) In the narrower sense, Intuitionism is, *by definition*, opposed to Utilitarianism and Egoism (because these methods, by definition, appeal to consequences). Sidgwick, looking for a “distinct ethical method,” starts by confining himself to Intuitionism in the narrower sense. (201) Sidgwick explains that there are three phases in which human beings pursue the Intuitional Method:

I. Perceptual Intuitionism

*Perceptual Intuitionism* is the phase in which human beings claim to have *immediate* particular intuitions regarding the dictates of Duty, these intuitions being self-evident by themselves, without requiring further moral reasoning. In this phase, Sidgwick explains, human beings claim to be able to judge each action individually as right or as wrong, without the necessity to appeal to rules of conduct or to discover its rightness or wrongness through reflection. Sidgwick quickly indicates that few human beings seem to be satisfied with such intuitions as to remain in the Perceptual phase, though. (100)

Instead, Sidgwick explains, human beings, inasmuch as their perceptual intuitions sometimes conflict with the intuitions of other human beings, find the need to appeal to the consent underlying the “Positive Morality of the community” (or morality of Common Sense), to support their own intuitions. (215) Sidgwick defines Morality of Common Sense – or Common-Sense Morality – as follows:

Common-Sense Morality: Collection “of … general rules, as to the validity of which there would be apparent agreement at least among moral persons of our own age and civilization” and “regarded as
II. Dogmatic Intuitionism

Dogmatic Intuitionism is the second phase, in which human beings claim that the principles currently accepted, conforming to the Morality of Common Sense, are, to them, self-evident moral intuitions. (101) Again, Sidgwick realizes that Dogmatic Intuitionism is not self-sufficient. After closely analyzing the central duties and virtues that Common-Sense Morality prescribes (such as Wisdom, Benevolence, Justice, Veracity, Prudence, Purity, Courage, Humility…), Sidgwick concludes that Common-Sense Morality can only give “practical guidance to common people in common circumstances,” but it is not able to be elevated into a scientific form. (361)

In Sidgwick’s view, the duties or virtues commonly recognized as self-evident must fulfill, at least in their common form, four conditions in order for them to be “in the highest degree of certainty attainable”. (338) These four conditions are:

(1) The terms of the proposition must be clear and precise. (338)
(2) The self-evidence of the proposition must be ascertained by careful reflection. (339)
(3) The propositions accepted as self-evident must be mutually consistent. (341)
(4) It needs to be accepted ‘universally’, or produce ‘general’ consent. (341)

Sidgwick claims, and spends a great length of his book showing, that none of the principles recognized by Common-Sense Morality satisfy all four conditions presented above. But Sidgwick believes he has discovered something more: Every time that such principles do not offer clear guidance, claims Sidgwick, human beings seem to appeal to the consequences of one’s action to show that, in case of doubt, the right action is that which yields a better outcome. In this sense, the
Intuitional Method, in its Dogmatic phase, appeals to the notion of ‘Good’ to define the notion of ‘Right’.\textsuperscript{20}

Sidgwick finds, then, that Intuitionism as a method of ethics \textit{cannot} be understood in the narrow sense of the term ‘intuition’: that is, recognizing certain rules as right in themselves, independently from the consequences. Instead, Sidgwick discovers that, when the apparently cognizable principles of Common-Sense Morality do not offer clear guidance, Intuitionism becomes a rational procedure that claims that the rationality of an action is proportional to the value the action would produce in terms of welfare. However, Sidgwick explains, insofar as Dogmatic Intuitionism does not appeal systematically to certain self-evident principles but just appeals to the benefits produced by one’s action to determine its rightness, it is not clear how these benefits ought to be assessed.

If Intuitionism is to be constituted into a system of Intuitional Ethics, Sidgwick claims, it needs to be elevated into a third phase in which such principles are provided: namely, \textit{Philosophical Intuitionism}. In this phase, as we will see, Sidgwick explains that Intuitionism determines that benefits and harms \textit{ought to} be distributed among persons and among time \textit{differently} depending on the point of view taken by the person determining how the value of an action needs to be accounted. It is here when Sidgwick discovers that Intuitionism yields two principles that \textit{structurally} differ among each other in the way they dictate that benefits and harms ought to be distributed.\textsuperscript{21}

This is the origin of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{20} Sidgwick has explained that the object of ethical inquiry can be regarded as the ‘Right’ or as the ‘Good’, but the two notions are, \textit{prima facie}, distinct. (3) The two notions are, in Sidgwick’s view, \textit{connected}: right conduct cannot be defined without a conception of the good. In particular, Sidgwick defines right conduct in terms of the Ultimate Good. (391) Phillips presents an “Unfairness Objection” to Sidgwick, as he claims that Sidgwick only applies these conditions to the principles of Common-Sense Morality but not to his principles. However, Phillips ultimately accepts principles that are very similar to the ones that Sidgwick suggests. See: (Phillips 2011: 100) or (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 144).

\textsuperscript{21} I have borrowed this way of explaining Sidgwick from David Brink’s classification between different types of rational theories. Brink, though, would not agree that Intuitionism unfolds into two \textit{rational} procedures that conflict. (Brink 1997A: 98)
III. Philosophical Intuitionism

As Sidgwick explains, Philosophical Intuitionism needs to transcend the *descriptive* character of Dogmatic Intuitionism (which expresses the common moral opinions of mankind) and provide a *normative* account of the ethical self-evident principles that human beings *ought to follow.* (373) To do so, Sidgwick investigates if the principles commonly accepted in Common-Sense Morality contain at least *self-evident elements* that allow them to be elevated to *moral axioms.*

According to Sidgwick, only three principles allow of such an elevation (all other principles held by Common-Sense Morality being subordinate to these): the principles of Justice, Prudence, and Rational Benevolence. (382)

The Principle of Justice, Sidgwick explains, refers us to the common notions of ‘equity’ and ‘fairness,’ suggesting that human beings *ought not to treat differently* individuals that are not *substantially* different. The self-evident element contained in the Principle of Justice is, according to Sidgwick:

SEEJ It “cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner 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”. (380)

From this self-evident element (SEEJ), Sidgwick concludes:

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22 Sidgwick warns philosophers against what he calls ‘sham-axioms’: “principles which appear certain and self-evident because they are substantially tautological” because either (a) they are empty of meaning, or (b) they are reached by a circular argument. (375) For example, it is circular if one claims that “one ought to aim at one’s own good’ and defines ‘good’ as what ‘one ought to aim at’. Parfit also warns us of these concealed tautologies. (Parfit 2011: 70)
Principle of Justice: Different “individuals are not to be treated differently, except on grounds of universal application”.23 (496)

There is some controversy regarding how many self-evident principles underlie the Principle of Rational Benevolence. (Phillips 2011: 96) Although there is one essential self-evident element from which the Principle of Rational Benevolence can be derived (SEEB-1), there is also another element which David Phillips claims is necessary to be able to see the Principle of Rational Benevolence as self-evident (SEEB-2). For now, let me present both these self-evident elements.

SEEB-1 The “good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other”. (382)

SEEB-2 As “a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally … not merely at a particular part of it”. (382)

With SEEB-1, Sidgwick suggests that from the impartial point of view of the universe, everyone’s welfare is equally important. If the rationality of an action indeed depends, as Sidgwick has suggested, on the benefits it would produce, and the welfare of every individual is equally important from the point of view of the universe, then right actions, other things equal, ought not to benefit my welfare more than the welfare of others. From SEEB-1, then, Sidgwick can conclude:

23 Although I agree with Phillips when he claims that “Sidgwick explicitly does not give any single-canonical expression of the principle” of Justice, his claim only applies to the chapter “Philosophical Intuitionism,” where Sidgwick presents for the first time such a principle. (Phillips 2011: 96) Instead, I believe that Sidgwick does present a clear expression of the Principle in the last chapter, and I present it here as such. (496) I also present the relation between principles and the self-evident elements differently than does Phillips.
Principle of Rational Benevolence: Each “one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own”.24 (382)

SEEB-2, then, is not needed, as Phillips suggests, to derive the Principle of Rational Benevolence. In fact, SEEB-2 could be easily regarded as a concealed tautology. When I claim that as a rational being, I am bound to aim at the good generally and not merely at a particular part of it, I can mean two things: (a) that when I am aiming at a certain good – the welfare of a human being, for instance –, I ought to aim at that good on the whole – the welfare of the human being on the whole; or (b) that when I am aiming at a particular good – the welfare of a human being at a moment in time, for instance –, and then I learn that the particular good that I am aiming is part of a more general good – a human being that persists in time –, I ought then to aim at this general good, and not the initial particular good. As far as I can see, (a) is evident insofar as it is a concealed tautology: it just says that when one aims at a good, one aims at all that this good is. Instead, (b) is not a concealed tautology, but it is not self-evident either. To judge the truth of (b) it is needed to ensure that the particular good really belongs to a more general good, and then that it would be irrational to promote that particular good without promoting the general good.

Now, I suggest that Sidgwick does believe that SEEB-2, in the form (b), is a self-evident principle. And he actually – implicitly – appeals to it in two occasions. On the one hand, Sidgwick uses SEEB-2 to derive the Principle of Prudence from its self-evident element (SEEP). On the other hand, as I claim later, Sidgwick assumes that the Principle of Rational Benevolence underlies Utilitarianism precisely because he assumes that SEEB-2, understood as (b), is true.25

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24 Sidgwick assumes here that the fact that one is bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own necessarily entails that one is bound to be concerned about the good of any other individual as much as his own.

25 As we will see, Sidgwick claims that the Principle of Rational Benevolence is required as a rational basis for Utilitarianism. Insofar as Utilitarianism, in its final form, claims that a right action is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness (good) on the whole, it is not clear, without SEEB-2, how the
Let us turn now to the Principle of Prudence and its self-evident element (SEEP):

SEEP  “Hereafter as such is to be regarded neither less nor more than Now”. (381)

Principle of Prudence:  One “ought to aim at one’s own good … on the whole”. (381)

Now, Sidgwick does not explain clearly the connection between SEEP and the self-evident Principle of Prudence. (381-382) But in a note to Chapter I of Book II, “The Principle and Method of Egoism,” Sidgwick indicates that from SEEP, one can infer that one ought to have “equal and impartial concern for all parts of one’s conscious life”. (124n) Sidgwick seems to believe that this claim is equivalent to the Principle of Prudence. I am uncertain that this is so. That ‘one is concerned equally for all parts of one’s conscious life’ does not entail that ‘one ought to aim at one’s own good on the whole.’

SEEB-2 is needed. David Brink, without appealing to SEEB-2, precisely suggests that Sidgwick can derive the Principle of Prudence from SEEP because Sidgwick relies on the notion of the separateness of persons. I will explain this notion in detail when I explain Brink’s account. However, the separateness of persons precisely entails that part of what it means to be a separate person is that from my position now I cannot be concerned about myself now without being concerned about myself as a whole. (Brink 1997A: 103) This is precisely what was needed for SEEB-2, in its (b) form, to be justified.26

At this moment, there are two points to be made. First, while the Principle of Justice is directed at ensuring that human beings ought to treat equally everyone who is substantially equal,

Principle of Rational Benevolence can really be required as a rational basis for Utilitarianism. Even in this case, as I explain later, I believe the appeal to SEEB-2 is problematic.

26 Authors such as Derek Parfit have cast doubt upon Prudence, precisely denying the separateness of persons. Parfit claims that the separateness of persons relies in a conception of personal identity that wrongly assumes that identity persists over time in a way that I ought to be concerned equally for all the parts of my life. This would deny SEEB-2. (Parfit 1987: 215, 263)
it does not explain *how human beings* ought to treat other human beings. In other words, it does not specify which actions are right, but it just dictates that whatever other principles dictate what is right to do, we ought not to exclude some human beings from being treated in a similar way without a *reason* grounding the difference of treatment. In this sense, Sidgwick leaves both the Principle of Prudence and the Principle of Rational Benevolence to determinate right conduct.

Second, if the definitions of the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence are sound, says Sidgwick, “the practical determination of Right Conduct depends on the determination of Ultimate Good”. (391) In Sidgwick’s view, the Ultimate Good can be conceived in three ways.

(A) The Ultimate Good is Virtue

Sidgwick claims that to define the Ultimate Good in terms of Virtue would lead to a logical circularity. After disregarding virtues, which turn into vices when pursued to an extreme (which could not possibly be the Ultimate Good precisely because the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence would then lead to vice), Sidgwick realizes that the only Virtues (according to Common Sense), which could be taken as the Universal Good, are Wisdom, Universal Benevolence, and Justice. But, none of these virtues could actually constitute the Ultimate Good since, when one attempts to define them, their definitions need to appeal to some other Good. Sidgwick claims:

Wisdom is insight into Good and the means to Good; Benevolence is exhibited in the purposive actions called “doing good;” Justice … lies in distributing Good (or evil) impartially according to right rules. (393)

As all virtues contain the notion ‘good’ in their definition, Sidgwick claims, defining the Ultimate Good in terms of Virtue would be falling into a circular argument. Furthermore, even if Virtue could be recognized as an end to be pursued in itself, Sidgwick indicates that it could not be taken as the Ultimate Good. Sidgwick shows that human beings often wonder about the limits
within which morality requires them to be virtuous. According to Sidgwick, this indicates that there is some other (Ultimate) Good which human beings do not want to renounce, even if it is required to do so to act virtuously. Thus, according to Sidgwick, this shows that Virtue cannot be taken as the sole Ultimate Good. (394)

(B) The Ultimate Good is Perfection or Excellence

Sidgwick discards Perfection on the same grounds that he disregards Virtue as the Ultimate Good. In Sidgwick’s words:27

However immediately the excellent quality of such gifts and skills [that conform the notion of human Perfection] may be recognized and admired, reflection shows that they are only valuable on account of the good or desirable conscious life in which they are or will be actualized. (395)

(C) The Ultimate Good is Desirable Conscious or Sentient Life

Sidgwick claims that desirable conscious life can be understood in two ways: either as (a) mere self-preservation (of one’s own life or of the community to which one belongs) or as (b) Happiness. (397-8) Sidgwick, as he often does, is quick to discard the option he believes is misguided. In Sidgwick’s view, self-preservation (either of one’s own life or of the community or the race to which one belongs) cannot be taken as the Ultimate Good by itself, as (again in Sidgwick’s view) human beings only desire their own self-preservation or that of its species inasmuch as they assume that such self-preservation will be accompanied with some degree of “Consciousness on the whole desirable”. (397) In other words, Sidgwick argues that if human beings would not expect any happiness throughout their lives, they would not regard their own preservation as the Ultimate

27 We can see why Sidgwick discarded Perfection as an end that human beings regard as ultimately reasonable to promote.
Good, and an eternal life would appear valueless to them. If this is so, Sidgwick claims, human beings regard Happiness or Pleasure as their Ultimate Good.

Consequently, the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence need to be restated:28

**Principle of Prudence:** One ought to aim at one’s own Happiness on the whole.

**Principle of Benevolence:** Each one is morally bound to regard the Happiness of any other individual as much as his own.

Philosophical Intuitionism, then, leads us to, on the one hand, a Principle of Justice (focused on *who* and not on *how*) that guarantees equal treatment for substantially equal individuals. On the other hand, it leads us to two self-evident principles, Rational Benevolence and Prudence, that determine what human beings ought to do. We can see now that Rational Benevolence and Prudence differ structurally on how to distribute happiness among different individuals. While the Principle of Rational Benevolence is neutral regarding whose welfare matters – everyone’s happiness is equally important – the Principle of Prudence is, instead, biased as to whose welfare matters – prioritizing one’s own happiness.29

Now, in Sidgwick’s view, the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence underlie the two other methods of ethics which are actually present in the ordinary practical thought of human beings when studying what human beings ought to do: namely, Egoism and Utilitarianism. In Sidgwick’s words:

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28 Sidgwick does not formulate these principles in these terms. I have substituted the term ‘good’ for ‘happiness’. It is important to clarify here, also, that Sidgwick does not claim that the principles themselves are self-evident: as I have explained, these principles are derived from certain self-evident propositions.

29 I am drawing here from Brink 1997A.
The axiom of Prudence, as I have given it, is a self-evident principle, implied in Rational Egoism as commonly accepted. Again, the axiom of Justice … belongs in all its applications to Utilitarianism as much as to any system commonly called Intuitional: while the axiom of Rational Benevolence is, in my view, required as a rational basis for the Utilitarian system. (386-387)

Let us move now to these two remaining methods: Egoism and Utilitarianism. First, however, let me reinforce a point that I made just before I explained Philosophical Intuitionism. I claimed then that the word ‘intuition’, when applied to Intuitionism in its third phase, cannot be understood in its narrower sense. In fact, the three self-evident ethical intuitions (corresponding to the principles of Justice, Prudence, and Rational Benevolence) discovered by the elevation of Intuitionism to Philosophical Intuitionism cannot be regarded as intuitions in this narrower sense. Instead, they need to be understood in the wider sense: as immediate intuitions regarding what ought to be done or aimed at, being as such not only compatible with Egoism and Utilitarianism, but, as we just have seen, according to Sidgwick, also intimately connected to these methods. Sidgwick arrives, then, at the conclusion that the Intuitional Method cannot properly be regarded as an independent method of ethics.

On the one hand, Sidgwick claims: “Accordingly, I find that I arrive, in my search for really clear and certain ethical intuitions, at the fundamental Principle of Utilitarianism”. (387) On the other hand, Sidgwick claims the “axiom of Prudence … is [only] a self-evident principle, implied in Rational Egoism”. (386) Sidgwick does not explain, more than by the fact that he is an acknowledged utilitarian, why the Principle of Prudence is only implied in Rational Egoism.

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30 The distinction between a narrower and a wider sense of the term ‘intuitional’ only applies to the Perceptual and Dogmatic phases of Intuitionism. In the Philosophical phase, Intuitionism ultimately leads to Utilitarianism and Egoism. The term ‘intuitional’ is not, with Philosophical Intuitionism, by definition opposed to Utilitarianism and Egoism.
1.2.2. Rational Egoism

Sidgwick claims that the Principle of Prudence is implied in the method of Rational Egoism. In Book II, Sidgwick explains that Egoism determines that the rational end of action for each individual is *his own greatest happiness* (119). If this is so, it is not difficult to see why the Principle of Prudence is implied in Rational Egoism: if I ought to aim at my own greatest happiness, and I ought not to prefer a lesser present happiness to a greater happiness in the future, I cannot but aim at my own greatest happiness except by promoting my happiness on the whole.  

1.2.3. Utilitarianism

Sidgwick indicates that the relation between the Principle of Rational Benevolence and Utilitarianism is stronger than the relation between the Principle of Prudence and Egoism. As we have seen, according to Sidgwick, the Principle of Rational Benevolence is required as a rational basis for Utilitarianism. In Sidgwick’s view, the Principle of Rational Benevolence is the missing element needed to complete the proof that John Stuart Mill, “the most persuasive and probably the most influential among English expositors of Utilitarianism,” offered for everyone to accept the Principle of Utility. (387) Mill’s proof, as Sidgwick explains it, can be schematized in the following way.

John Stuart Mill’s Proof for Utilitarianism:

1. The only evidence of the desirability of some thing is that people actually desire it.
2. The only evidence of the desirability of happiness is that people actually desire it.

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31 Sidgwick dedicates many pages in *The Methods of Ethics* to show the weaknesses of Rational Egoism. Inasmuch as I am exploring Rational Egoism only in terms of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, and Rational Egoism could plausibly respond Sidgwick’s practically oriented criticisms, I do not explain Sidgwick’s objections here.
3. People do individually desire their own happiness.

4. General happiness is desired by the aggregate of individuals.

5. General happiness is desirable.

Sidgwick indicates that Mill’s aim with this proof is normative and not descriptive. (388) Mill not only wants to claim that general happiness is desirable, but also:


However, Sidgwick claims that Mill’s proof, to be able to arrive at 6, is missing its normative element. (388) As Sidgwick explains, the fact that the aggregate of individuals desires their happiness only implies that each of the individuals desires his own happiness, but it does not imply that general happiness is desirable for each of the individuals. In other words, Mill is taking the aggregate of individuals as a singular unit able to desire general happiness as a Whole and then claims that this general desire of this fictitious unit is shared by each of the individuals constituting this Whole.

Sidgwick claims that appealing to the Principle of Rational Benevolence (and by extension to the point of view of the Universe) can complete Mill’s proof. (388) However, as I have already indicated, I believe that Sidgwick actually needs to rely on SEEB-2 to derive the Utilitarian Maxim from the Principle of Rational Benevolence. The argument would go like this: If I am bound to regard the Happiness of any other individual as much as my own (Rational Benevolence), and as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally, and not at a particular part of it (SEEB-2), then, I ought to desire general happiness. This is how the Principle of Rational Benevolence would serve as a rational basis for Utilitarianism.
However, it is not clear that the appeal to SEEB-2, even in its \((b)\) form, is legitimate here. Sidgwick would need to show that my welfare – as a human being – belongs to the sum of everyone’s welfares in a way that it would be irrational to promote my welfare – in this case, happiness – without promoting everyone’s welfare. But this is precisely what Mill’s proof is trying to show.

In this sense, Sidgwick cannot appeal to SEEB-2. In that case, the only way in which we could derive the Maxim of Utilitarianism from the Principle of Rational Benevolence is if the term ‘happiness’ in Rational Benevolence and the Maxim of Utilitarianism had a commensurable meaning. And I believe it does not. In Rational Benevolence, the term ‘happiness’ refers to the happiness of a singular individual, claiming that I ought to regard each individual happiness in the same degree. In the Maxim of Utilitarianism, the term ‘happiness’ refers instead to the General Happiness of a supposed Whole constituted by the aggregate of individuals.\(^{32}\) Sidgwick’s argument, then, is problematic.

Let us assume, though, for now, that Sidgwick’s argument is sound.\(^{33}\) This would be, according to Sidgwick, of fundamental importance: if the Principle of Rational Benevolence is needed as the rational basis for the proof of Utilitarianism, and such principle is obtained as a self-evident principle when analyzing the Intuitional Method, then the Intuitional method and the Utilitarian method are complementary. Sidgwick claims:

We have found that the common antithesis between Intuitionist and Utilitarians must be entirely discarded: since such abstract moral principles as we can admit to be really self-evident are not only not incompatible with a Utilitarian system, but even seem required to furnish a rational basis for such as a system. (496)

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\(^{32}\) As Lazari-Radek and Singer claim: “Perhaps … what utilitarians have failed to appreciate is that when we properly recognize the separateness of persons, it is no longer possible to add up the sum of the good or bad things that may happen to each of them” (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 139). Sidgwick is assuming that individual happiness is only a part of some General Happiness, and that is why he claims he is able to infer the maxim of Utilitarianism from the Principle of Rational Benevolence.

\(^{33}\) If my argument is sound, Rational Benevolence and Utilitarianism do not necessarily coincide, as Sidgwick assumes. This would be crucial to understand the Profoundest Problem of Ethics without needing to appeal to Utilitarianism.
Let us recapitulate. As we explained, Sidgwick’s aim in *The Methods of Ethics* is to analyze the relation of the different methods of ethics, to see if their dictates of what human beings ought to do, or aim at, are compatible with each other. If Sidgwick were to find that two or more methods conflicted, ethics itself would be in peril. Until this moment, we have seen that Intuitionism gives three self-evident ethical principles, and in its higher form it is not an *independent* rational procedure, but rather, on the one hand, it provides the rational basis for Utilitarianism and, on the other hand, it provides a principle implicit in Rational Egoism. If my analysis of *The Methods of Ethics* is sound, Sidgwick has shown until now that the antecedent of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is true: that is, that two different rational procedures – namely, Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism – dictate different principles.

Finally, now, we can ask: what is, then, the relation between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism? Sidgwick analyzes the relationship between these two methods in the last chapter of *The Methods of Ethics*. (386) Before we move to the second chapter of this thesis, we can now give definitions of Utilitarianism, Rational Egoism, and Intuitionism in their final forms:

**Intuitionism:** Method of Ethics that dictates that we have the capacity to judge immediately what ought to be done or aimed at.

**Utilitarianism:** Method of Ethics that dictates that the conduct which is objectively right is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness for society on the whole.

**Rational Egoism:** Method of Ethics that dictates that the conduct which is objectively right is that which will produce the agent’s own greatest happiness on the whole.
Chapter 2. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics

Sidgwick claims that the dictates of the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence appear each as self-evident from their own different points of view. (7, 382) The Principle of Prudence is self-evident when we analyze the notion of the Good while taking the point of view of the individual: it is self-evident that for me, my own happiness is all-important. (420) And, as we will now see, if I remain in my individual point of view, in Sidgwick’s view, I cannot self-evidently see that I ought to regard the happiness of other individuals as much as my own: I can confine myself (without being irrational) to claim that for me, my own happiness is my Ultimate Good. It is only, as Sidgwick (cautiously) proposes, when we take the point of view of the Universe (and we lose our individual point of view) that the Ultimate Good cannot be my individual happiness. From the point of view of the Universe, Sidgwick explains, my “happiness cannot be a more important part of Good, taken universally, than the equal happiness of any other person.” (421) In this sense, from the point of view of the Universe, the Principle of Rational Benevolence becomes self-evident, in detriment of the Principle of Prudence. The two principles are, then, for Sidgwick, incommensurable.  

34 This is not an uncontroversial claim, both exegetically and philosophically speaking. Philosophically speaking, interpretations such as Parfit’s or Frankena’s, tend to go around this detail, claiming that the principles of Rational Benevolence and Prudence can be asserted without appealing to different points of view (Parfit 2011: 135; Frankena 1974: 456). They do so to sustain completely opposite claims: while Parfit uses it to maintain that the two principles are not incommensurable, Frankena does so to claim that they actually are incommensurable (Parfit 2011: 135; Frankena 1974: 456). Exegetically speaking, there is also controversy: for example, while Parfit philosophically dismisses appealing to points of view, he does concede that Sidgwick appeals to them; Frankena, by contrast, claims that Sidgwick does not really appeal to different points of view to defend the self-evidence of Prudence and Benevolence (Parfit 2011: 134; Frankena 1974: 456). From this, we can infer that exegetical accord is not necessary to provide a philosophically interesting view which departs from Sidgwick’s The Methods of Ethics. I, for example, exegetically agree with Parfit, but I philosophically agree with Frankena’s regarding the incommensurability of both principles. This is why, even though I understand that this claim is controversial, I have opted to explain Sidgwick as I read him. If someone does not agree with my interpretation, I do not think it would matter much: philosophically speaking one can take different positions independently of the exegetical interpretation that one wants to defend.
2.1. Sidgwick’s Profoundest Problem of Ethics

In Sidgwick’s view, since the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence and the methods of Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism, both principles and methods appearing as self-evident only from their own respective points of view, dictate respectively to aim at one’s own greatest happiness on the whole and to aim at the greatest general happiness on the whole, Utilitarianism and Rational Egoism yield conflicting conclusions. Sidgwick labels the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. It is profoundest because this conflict violates the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics that, Sidgwick assumes – in what I call the Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability –, is biconditionally related to the possibility to trust our Practical Reason. If the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism would indeed occur, then it would cast doubt upon the reliability of our moral reasoning, and we would be pushed to doubt the authority of our rational capacity to determine right conduct.

Sidgwick seems to have two options if he wants to avoid falling into the Profoundest Problem of Ethics: either (i) Sidgwick can show that either Utilitarianism or Egoism can be theoretically rejected or modified; or, (ii) Sidgwick can show that, even if the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence yield conflicting conclusions, this conflict is practically irrelevant, because acting in accordance with the Principle of Prudence yields the same results as acting in accordance with the Principle of Rational Benevolence. In case (ii), then, it would not matter which principle one would actually promote, because they would both guarantee one’s own happiness on the whole and the greatest general happiness.

If this is not demonstrated, if one cannot either demonstrate that Utilitarianism or Egoism can be rejected or modified, or that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence are practically harmonized, Sidgwick’s study of the methods of ethics would lead, as I have indicated, to
the conclusion that two of the methods, present in the ordinary practical thought of human beings when determining the principles of ethics, directly conflict.

In that case, claims Sidgwick, we would be forced “to admit an ultimate and fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is Reasonable in conduct; and from this admission it would seem to follow that the apparently intuitive operation of the Practical Reason, manifested in these contradictory judgments, is after all illusory”. (508) This contradiction constitutes the Profoundest Problem of Ethics.

Keeping this in mind, I believe that the last chapter of The Methods of Ethics, in which Sidgwick presents his full account of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, can be virtually divided in two sections. Each corresponds to one of the two options Sidgwick has to avoid the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism, and the subsequent violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics: first, Sidgwick’s attempt to theoretically solve the Profoundest Problem by showing that (I) Utilitarianism or Egoism can be rejected or modified; and second, Sidgwick’s attempt to practically solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics by showing that (II) the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence, although they theoretically conflict, practically yield the same outcomes.

**2.1.1. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics Is Theoretically Unsolvable**

Sidgwick renounces from the beginning the possibility of rejecting or modifying Utilitarianism, and he attempts to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics by suggesting that Egoism seems vulnerable to be overruled by Utilitarianism. In the chapter “The Proof of Utilitarianism,” Sidgwick presents a proof, analogous to that presented by Mill, in which Sidgwick attempts to show that Utilitarianism can offer an argument to convince the Egoist to join the Utilitarian cause. To do so, Sidgwick claims, the Egoist needs to put “forward, implicitly or explicitly, the proposition that his
happiness or pleasure is Good, not only *for him* but from the point of the view of the Universe, - as (e.g.) by saying that ‘nature designed him to seek his own happiness”. (420, 421) If the Egoist accepts this premise, the Utilitarian can then point out to him that from the point of view of the Universe, a part of Good (the egoist’s sole happiness) cannot be more important than the happiness of any other part. Then, the Utilitarian can convince the Egoist that if he *really* wants to aim at the general Good, he ought to aim at General Happiness, and thus subscribe to Utilitarianism. (421)

Sidgwick confesses, however, that his Utilitarian proof is vulnerable to the radical Egoist.35 If the radical Egoist rejects the premise that, by aiming at his own Good or happiness, he is actually aiming at the General Good, the proof would not appeal to him. Sidgwick claims:

> If the Egoist strictly confines himself to stating his conviction that he ought to take his own happiness or pleasure as his ultimate end, there seems no opening for any line of reasoning to lead him to Universalistic Hedonism as a first principle; it cannot be proved that the difference between his own happiness and another’s happiness is not *for him* all-important. (420)

In other words, Sidgwick realizes that although the Utilitarian can convince the Egoist to accept the Principle of Rational Benevolence when the Egoist agrees to take the point of view of the universe with regard to the Good, there is no rational proof to show the radical Egoist that he ought to take such universal point of view. Then, as we have explained, without taking the point of view of the universe, the Principle of Rational Benevolence will not be self-evident to him, the radical Egoist. More than this, as Sidgwick claims, “even if a man admits the self-evidence of the Principle of Rational Benevolence, he may still hold that his own happiness is an end which it is irrational for him to sacrifice to any other”. (498) If that is the case, to ensure that morality can be

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35 The radical Egoist assumes that he is not promoting the Universal Good, and thus is happy to claim that his actions would not be right from the point of view of the universe. The objection of the radical Egoist is analogous to my objection against (SEEB-2) in section 1.2.3 Utilitarianism.
made *completely* rational, Sidgwick would need to show that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence can be practically harmonized.

2.1.2. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics Is Practically Unsolvable

Now, if there is no rational proof to convince the radical Egoist to adopt the point of view of the universe, necessary to see the Principle of Rational Benevolence as self-evident, and if the radical Egoist could still regard it as irrational to sacrifice his own happiness to the happiness of any other, even if he were to recognize the self-evidence of the Principle of Rational Benevolence, then, according to Sidgwick, the Profoundest Problem is *theoretically* unavoidable. But there is still one option left to escape the Profoundest Problem of Ethics: show the radical Egoist that the best way to aim at his own greatest happiness is by acting in accordance with the Principle of Rational Benevolence. If that could be proved, the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence, as well as Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism, would be harmonized.

I. Appeal to the actual state of society

Sidgwick admits that “in any tolerable state of society the performance of duties towards others and the exercise of social virtues seem *generally* likely to coincide with the attainment of the greatest happiness possible for the virtuous agent”. (498) However, according to Sidgwick, there is not in the actual state of society an empirical proof able to ensure the universality and the completeness of this otherwise observable tendency. (498) In this sense, Sidgwick explains, the coincidence between the greatest happiness of the individual and the greatest general happiness, when human beings are acting in accordance with the Principle of Rational Benevolence, cannot
be guaranteed in the actual conditions of human life. In the actual state of society, Sidgwick explains, the results yielded by the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence would only conflict in rare cases, but the conflict could (and will) still occur. (489-490)

Additionally, though Sidgwick has shown that Utilitarianism ultimately underlies the apparent self-evident rules of Common-Sense Morality (by showing the transition between Dogmatic and Philosophic Intuitionism), Sidgwick admits that Common-Sense is less rigid than Utilitarianism at dictating human beings to aim at the greatest happiness of the whole. (499) While Utilitarianism requires that one always promotes universal happiness, Common-Sense Morality tells one to promote universal happiness except in those cases when one’s own happiness is at risk. Then, as the harmony between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence cannot empirically be demonstrated, nor does Common-Sense seem to support such harmony, there will be times in which human beings, even if not radical Egoists, will have contradictory intuitions regarding what they ought to aim at. The Profoundest Problem, then, in the actual conditions of human life and thought, cannot be avoided.

In the actual conditions of human life, then, according to Sidgwick, Practical Reason is divided between two conflicting self-evident principles. There is, in Sidgwick’s words, a Dualism of Practical Reason. (Sidgwick 1889: 483) Sidgwick explains such dualism explicitly in the article “Some Fundamental Ethical Controversies:”

Along with (a) a fundamental moral conviction that I ought to sacrifice my own happiness, if by so doing I can increase the happiness of others to a greater extent than I diminish my own, I find also (b) a conviction … that it would be irrational to sacrifice any portion of my own happiness unless the sacrifice is to be somehow at some time compensated by an equivalent addition to my own happiness”. (Sidgwick 1889: 483)

According to Sidgwick, even though the Principle of Rational Benevolence is self-evident, he cannot but also believe that “the distinction between any one individual and any other is real
and fundamental, and that consequently “I” am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals”. (Sidgwick 1889: 483) In Sidgwick’s view, both intuitions appear equally reasonable, and thus Reason is ultimately divided. Inasmuch as these intuitions are incompatible and yield contradictory results, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is deeply entrenched in reality.

The question is: could the Dualism of Practical Reason be dissolved and, subsequently, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics be avoided? Sidgwick implicitly seems to contemplate three other options that would practically avoid the Profoundest Problem of Ethics.

II. Change the actual state of society

First, Sidgwick considers the option of improving “the adjustment of the machine of Law in any society, and so stimulate and direct the common awards of praise and blame, and so develop and train the moral sense of the members of the community, as to render it clearly prudent for every individual to promote as much as possible the general good”. (499) In this way, the best way for the radical Egoist to promote his own greatest happiness would be by acting in accordance with the Principle of Rational Benevolence. However, Sidgwick claims, this option, if ever possible, would only serve for a future solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics; it would not serve to convince a present Egoist that he ought to aim now at the universal good, if he presently wants to guarantee his own greatest happiness. (499)

III. Sympathy

Sidgwick wonders if appealing to sympathy, that is, the pleasure that we feel due to the happiness of others, could show the Egoist that the best way to promote his own happiness is to
promote the happiness of the whole. (500) In the rare cases in which the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence conflict, Sidgwick asks if the sympathy human beings feel due to the happiness of others would guarantee enough pleasure to overrule the sacrifice that they would (apparently) be making by aiming at the greatest general happiness and not at their own greatest happiness at that moment. In this sense, Sidgwick is appealing to SEEP, arguing that favoring the Principle of Prudence when there is a conflict between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence is to favor a smaller pleasure to the detriment of a greater pleasure: the pleasure that we feel through sympathy due to the happiness of others.

Now, Sidgwick recognizes that sympathy does play a crucial role in aiming at one’s own greatest happiness and that the radical Egoist could never achieve his greatest happiness without sympathy. However, Sidgwick claims, sympathy cannot serve as a proof of the practical harmony between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence for three reasons. First, Sidgwick explains that sympathy can direct human beings to follow Rational Egoism, if the happiness at risk is not our own but that of people we love or with whom we have close ties. Second, sympathy cannot be contemplated only with the pleasures it brings about but also with the pain that it produces: as Sidgwick claims, considering that in the actual state of society the conditions of human life involve pain and misery to a great extent, even the philanthropic human beings will feel pain due to the negative characteristics of sympathy. (503) Finally, Sidgwick indicates that in some cases, the best way for some man to promote universal happiness is by “working in comparative solitude,” renouncing the pleasure of sympathy. (503)

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36 Sidgwick claims that he could not enjoy the pleasures due to sympathy. He would miss the elevation to pursue a wide interest, as well as the secure and serene satisfaction of pursuing an aim that exceeds the individual good. (501)
IV. God

Having shown that neither (I) the actual state of society, (II) a future improved state of society, nor (III) sympathy, can practically avoid the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, Sidgwick considers a fourth option: to perceive the “Utilitarian Code (…) as the Law of God,” the compliance (or not) of which will be rewarded (or punished) in the afterlife with happiness (or pain), but Sidgwick realizes that this option does not constitute a proof of the harmony between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence. (504) Instead, it simply entrusts Ethics to theology (and, ultimately, to faith). Why? Because, according to Sidgwick, although the Principle of Rational Benevolence is self-evident, it is not self-evident that such a principle is dependent on an omnipotent God who could guarantee such rewards in an afterlife. (507)

In this sense, Sidgwick claims, we do not cognize the Utilitarian code and Universal Happiness as an end at which we ought to aim as self-evident through the prior cognition of the existence of God as self-evident, deducing from the cognition of an omnipotent God the Utilitarian code to which He normatively constrains us or the Universal Happiness that He would design as His end. In the first place, Sidgwick claims, we refer to the notions of ‘right’ and ‘good’ absolutely, without any reference to a superior lawgiver. (505) Second, if we were to recognize as self-evident Universal Happiness through self-evidently cognizing it as God’s end, it would not still be self-evident: Why, Sidgwick asks, if God were omnipotent, He did not bring about His end just yet? (506) It is in this sense, then, that Sidgwick claims that the assumption of the existence of an omnipotent God cannot be rationally proven as self-evident, nor that Rational Benevolence is dependent on God.

If this is so, the harmony between Prudence and Rational Benevolence cannot be, finally, proven; ethics is, consequently, vulnerable to its Profoundest Problem. In this sense, “in the rarer cases of a recognized conflict between self-interest and duty, practical reason, being divided
against itself, would cease to be a motive on either side”. (508) In this case, Sidgwick suggests that, even though we would not need to give up morality – in its wider sense – all together, we need to renounce the *practical* constraint to make Practical Reason consistent, as well as renounce the pretension to rationalize morality completely. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics is, then, still waiting for a solution, if that is at all possible.

### 2.1.3. Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument

Sidgwick’s conclusion that Ethics is plagued by the profoundest problem cannot be properly understood without understanding Sidgwick’s appeal to what I call Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. In fact, these three assumptions act as the three key premises of an argument that underlies Sidgwick’s reasoning throughout *The Methods of Ethics* and that concludes in the last chapter of *The Methods of Ethics*. I call this argument *Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument*:

1. **Principle of Practical Reason’s Authority**: Ethics is plagued with a profoundest problem if and only if human beings cannot always trust Practical Reason in determining what they ought to do.

2. **Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability**: Human beings can always trust Practical Reason in determining what they ought to do *if and only if* the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is not violated.

3. **Fundamental Postulate of Ethics**: If two valid rational procedures yield different principles, *then* these principles must not practically or theoretically conflict.

4. Two valid rational procedures yield different principles. [as explained in section 1.2]

5. The principles theoretically conflict. [as explained in section 2.1.1]

6. The principles practically conflict. [as explained in section 2.1.2]
Therefore:

(7) The Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is violated. [by (3), (4), (5), and (6)]

Therefore:

(8) We cannot always trust Practical Reason in determining what we ought to do. [by (2) and (7)]

Therefore:

(9) Ethics is plagued with the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. [by (1) and (8)]

Two definitions are needed here:

Theoretical conflict: Principles theoretically conflict if and only if they are either mutually inconsistent, or incommensurable.

Practical conflict: Principles practically conflict if and only if one cannot act in accordance with both principles at the same time; one can only perform one action or the other.

I can now clarify two common confusions that prevent an appropriate understanding of Sidgwick’s Profoundest Problem of Ethics. First, regarding Sidgwick’s attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument illustrates that Sidgwick does not actually attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, he only attempts to show that the problem does not occur in the first place – he would have succeeded if he would have shown that either (4), (5), or (6) are false. I argue that this is so because of Sidgwick’s unquestioned acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. When one accepts (1), (2), and (3) in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument, the shadow of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is pervading Ethics from the
beginning. Be that as it may, Sidgwick leaves the Profoundest Problem of Ethics unresolved. And this is precisely Sidgwick’s conclusion to The Methods of Ethics.

Second, there is another argument underlying Sidgwick’s The Methods of Ethics that, as we will see in Chapter III, is often confused with what I call Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument. I call it Sidgwick’s Underlying Preoccupation. While in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument it is Ethics that is at stake, in what I call Sidgwick’s Underlying Preoccupation it is Utilitarianism – Morality in its narrow sense – that is at stake. Sidgwick’s Underlying Preoccupation:

(I) Principle of Morality’s Authority: If Morality has not full rational authority, Morality would be plagued with a profoundest problem.

(II) Principle of Morality’s Reliability: Morality has rational authority if and only if it is not irrational to act as morality requires.

(III) Principle of Morality’s Rationality: It is never irrational to act as morality requires if and only if:

   (i) The principle/s of morality do not practically conflict with other rational principles. 
   or

   (ii) One does not have overriding or supreme reasons to act in opposition to Morality.

(IV) The principle of Morality – Rational Benevolence – conflicts with a rational principle – Prudence. [as explained in section 1.2]

(V) One has supreme reasons to act in opposition to Morality. [as explained in sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2]

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37 Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument and Sidgwick’s Underlying Preoccupation correspond respectively with what Derek Parfit calls the rationalist’s and the moralist’s problem. (Parfit 2011: 143)
Therefore:

(VI) Sometimes it might be irrational to act as morality requires. [by (III), (IV) and (v)]

Therefore:

(VII) The rational authority of morality is undermined. [by (II) and (VI)]

Therefore

(VIII) Morality – in its narrow sense – is plagued with a profoundest problem. [by (I) and (VII)]

I call the set of three key premises of Sidgwick Underlying Preoccupation the *Fundamental Postulates of Morality*. I argue that it is Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument, not Sidgwick’s Underlying Preoccupation, that leads Sidgwick to claim that Ethics – in its wider sense – is plagued with a profoundest problem. Why? Because, in principle, Sidgwick conceives that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics could be solved either by showing that ultimately one ought to act in accordance with Utilitarianism – not Rational Egoism –, or by showing that ultimately one ought to act in accordance with Rational Egoism – and not Utilitarianism. Instead, the Profoundest Problem of *Morality*, as we may call it, can only be solved if the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism is resolved in benefit of Utilitarianism. Furthermore, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics as Sidgwick explains does not only cast doubt upon Utilitarianism: It casts doubt upon Practical Reason itself and its capacity to determine right conduct. This is why Sidgwick regards it as the profoundest problem of Ethics to begin with.

The confusion between Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument and Sidgwick’s Underlying Preoccupation is the reason why, I believe, some of the philosophers that I study in Chapter III – such as William Frankena and David Brink – not only fail to offer a solution to the Profoundest Problem
of Ethics, but they fail to approach the problem that profoundly concerned Sidgwick in writing *The Methods of Ethics*. When I refer to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, then, I refer to the conclusion of Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument. I believe this is Sidgwick’s conclusion in *The Methods of Ethics*, warning that the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism creates a profoundest problem for Ethics – and not only for Morality.

### 2.2. Preliminary Analysis of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

#### 2.2.1. A Profoundest Problem of Ethics?

The question now is: Should we believe Sidgwick’s warning about the Profoundest Problem of Ethics? That is, should we be worried about the capacity of our Practical Reason to determine right conduct? It seems to me that the answer to these two questions depends on two points. First, quite obviously, it depends on whether some author after Sidgwick has solved the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. If that were to be the case, we would not need to worry any longer about the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. In Chapter 3, I try to explain the attempts of several renowned authors to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. However, I argue that they all fail. If my arguments against their solutions are sound, then, it seems that we should be concerned about Ethics being plagued by a profoundest problem. Unless, second, we deny that there is a Profoundest Problem of Ethics to be worried about in the first place. Some could claim, for instance, that Sidgwick’s assumption that there are indeed different methods of ethics insofar as we “find” them in the common moral reasoning of human beings is not grounded. Similarly, others could claim that Sidgwick’s appeal to self-evident principles is not valid, suggesting that Intuitionism cannot be a valid rational procedure. And others could even deny that there is a Practical Reason to begin with.

I do not pretend to defend Sidgwick’s theory. Doing this would require me to have a knowledge in meta-ethics and normative ethics that I do not yet have. Honestly, I am not even sure
whether I want to defend him against these objections. However, I still believe that we should be concerned about what Sidgwick calls the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. In particular, I do believe that in our everyday lives we often find ourselves with situations in which, if we judge the situation from our own point of view, we see rationally that we ought to perform certain acts, but when we judge the same situation from an impartial point of view, we are rationally convinced that we ought to act in another – conflicting – way. Is the conflict between intuitions, methods of ethics, rational procedures, reasons, principles…? That, I do not yet know.

2.2.2. Five fundamental distinctions

I am convinced, though, that at least the conflict between a self-regarding *rational* procedure and an other-regarding *rational* procedure occurs often in our everyday lives and that it indeed causes a profound problem for those of us who are trying to determine rationally what we ought to do. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics is, then, ethically relevant. Consequently, so are the attempts to solve it – which I study in Chapter 3. Before we move to Chapter 3, though, it is crucial that we present certain distinctions that help understand how authors have read and interpreted the Profoundest Problem of Ethics and how they have attempted to solve it.38 The distinctions are: (a) the distinction between what Sidgwick *did* say and what he *ought to* have said; (b) the distinction between Internalism and Externalism; (c) the distinction between the moralist’s and the rationalist’s problems; (d) the distinction agent-relative, temporally-neutral theories, agent-relative, present-biased theories, and person-neutral, temporally-neutral theories; and (e) the distinction between *conflict-enhancing* or *conflict-mitigating* interpretations of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason.

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38 Three of these distinctions – (a), (b), and (e) – are offered by David Phillips. The other crucial distinctions – (c) and (d) – are offered by Derek Parfit and David Brink respectively.
2.2.2.1 What Sidgwick ought to have said

As I explain in section 2.2.2.4, David Phillips provides different categories by which different interpretations of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason can be distinguished. However, Phillips does not only provide such a classification, but he also argues that some interpretations falling into one category are better than others. Importantly, even though he does believe that the interpretations that he favors are exegetically sound, he understands the exegetical problems of claiming that one class of interpretations is better exegetically than others, considering all the different textual evidence to which one can appeal, and that Sidgwick was not terminologically consistent throughout his treatise. Instead, Phillips claims that his interpretation is better philosophically, and therefore, “Sidgwick (rationally) ought to have believed” the interpretation that he puts forward. (Phillips 1998: 66) For instance, even if Phillips admits that Sidgwick may not have agreed with his interpretation, Phillips claims that he philosophically ought to have done so, insofar as it would have better served Sidgwick’s own argument.

In my view, this distinction is useful insofar as it allows us not to get bogged down in exegetical niceties and focus instead entirely on the interpretation that is philosophically sound. In this sense, even if some of the authors (David Brink, for example) claim that Sidgwick needs to be understood as putting forward the kind of interpretation that they put forward, I ignore such claims and explain their interpretations as claiming that Sidgwick ought to have agreed with them but not that he actually would have agreed. If we do so, we might be able to find which author provides philosophically the soundest interpretation, even if departing from Sidgwick’s The Methods of Ethics.
2.2.2.2. Internalism versus Externalism

An internalist moral theory, as opposed to an externalist moral theory, establishes a necessary correspondence between what is moral – in its narrow sense – and what is reasonable to do.\(^\text{39}\) For an internalist, the rational authority of morality is not open to question: if I judge an action as moral, I also judge it as reasonable. (Phillips 1998: 61-62; also, Brink 1992: 202-204) An externalist theory, on the other hand, questions the rational authority of morality: even if one judges an action as moral, one might still wonder if such an action is rational. As we will see, David Brink argues that Sidgwick is an externalist and that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics precisely raises the question about the rational authority of morality.

**Internalism:** Thesis of morality that assumes the internal connection between rationality and morality – in its narrow sense.

**Externalism:** Thesis of morality that denies the internal connection between rationality and morality – in its narrow sense.

2.2.2.3. The rationalist’s problem and the moralist’s problem

When approaching Sidgwick’s Profoundest Problem of Ethics, Derek Parfit distinguishes, in Volume I of *On What Matters*, between a *rationalist’s problem* and a *moralist’s problem*. By distinguishing between these two problems, Parfit seems to suggest that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics can be better approached by being disassembled in these two more approachable problems. (Parfit 2011: 143) The rationalist’s problem, Parfit claims, is to show that, when Duty and Self-

\(^{39}\) This distinction is not to be confused with the meta-ethical distinction between Internalism and Externalism. While Phillips’ distinction appeals to the connection between morality and rationality, the meta-ethical distinction contrasts a view that assumes that moral judgments necessarily motivate – Internalism – with a view that denies that – Externalism. (Korsgaard 2014: 11n)
Interest conflict, reason would always give us guidance in what we ought to do, and that at least in some cases, “there would be something that we had most reason to do”. (Parfit 2011: 143) The moralist’s problem is to show that reason does not undermine morality. In other words, that we do not “have sufficient reasons to act wrongly”.40 (Parfit 2011: 143)

Rationalist’s problem: It is the rationalist’s challenge to show that reason will always give us guidance in requiring us what we ought to do; and that at least in some cases, there be some actions that we have most reasons to do.

Moralist’s problem: It is the moralist’s challenge to show that the rational authority of morality is not undermined.

In my view, the rationalist’s problem is faithful with the problem that Sidgwick foresaw in *The Methods of Ethics*; the problem that renders the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism profound, and that it is expressed in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument. The moralist’s problem seems to express Sidgwick’s hope that, even if the rationalist’s problem is solved, the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism will not undermine Utilitarianism. The moralist’s problem is expresses in what I call Sidgwick’s Underlying Preoccupation. As I illustrate in Chapter 3, all authors except David Brink and William Frankena understand the Profoundest Problem of Ethics in terms of the rationalist’s problem – Brink and Frankena claim instead that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics expresses what Parfit calls the moralist’s problem. In Chapter 3, I present a robust objection against Brink’s and Frankena’s claim.

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40 Parfit claims that we have sufficient reasons when our reasons to act in some way are neither weaker nor stronger than the reasons to act in another way. (Parfit 2011: 32)
2.2.2.4. Three different theories of rationality

For now, let us just grant that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics needs to be – at least initially – understood as the rationalist’s problem. Understood in this way, the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism, or Rational Benevolence, is a conflict between two different rational theories. These two theories of rationality, as I have already claimed, belong to a kind of theories of rationality that assume that the rationality of an action is proportional to the value the action produces. (Brink 1997A: 97) David Brink suggests that theories within this type differ among each other in the way they allocate benefits and harms among persons and among time. (Brink 1997A: 97) Before determining what is considered as valuable for these theories – for Sidgwick, for instance, happiness –, these theories can structurally differ among themselves in the way they dictate that benefits and harms ought to be distributed.

Brink suggests that, taking into account “what [rational theories] say about whose welfare matters” and about “the temporal location of benefits and harms”, different theories of rationality can be distinguished. For our interests, three theories are relevant:

Agent-relative, temporally-neutral, theories: Theories that claim that the agent’s own welfare has a rational significant for her that the others agents’ welfare do not have for her. At the same time, the temporal location of benefits and harms ought not to have rational significance for her. (Brink 1997A: 98)
Agent-relative, present-biased, theories: Theories that claim that the agent’s own welfare in the present has a rational significance that other’s agent welfare or her own welfare at other moments in time do not have for her.

Person-neutral, temporally-neutral, theories: Theories that claim that everyone's welfare is equally rationally significant, independent of the temporal location in which benefits and burdens may fall.

Rational Egoism is agent-biased and temporally-neutral. (Brink 1997A: 98) Rational Benevolence is, in many readings, a person-neutral, temporally-neutral, theory of rationality. As I explain, Derek Parfit defends an agent-relative, present-biased, theory of rationality.

2.2.2.5. Conflict-enhancing versus Conflict-mitigating Interpretations

Phillips is right, in my view, in claiming that the “basic issue in the interpretation (...) of Sidgwick is how to understand the conflict or contradiction between egoism and utilitarianism”. (Phillips 1998: 58) Phillips distinguishes between two types of interpretations that differ in the way they understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence: conflict-enhancing interpretations and conflict-mitigating interpretations.41 (Phillips 2011: 134) In particular, Phillips explains

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41 Phillips, in his article “Sidgwick, Dualism, and Indeterminacy of Practical Reason”, suggests another classification. Phillips distinguishes three types of interpretations that have been given to Sidgwick’s dualism, which he names as The Standard View – which corresponds to conflict-enhancing interpretations; and The Indeterminacy View and Brink’s Externalist View – which together correspond to conflict-mitigating interpretations.
that a principle can be philosophically understood in different ways depending on their (I) *deontic force* and (II) their *content*: (Phillips 2011: 115)

I. Deontic force

By appealing to the deontic force of the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence, Phillips refers us to the force that these principles have in relation to the degree of exigency of the compliance that is derived from accepting such principles as self-evident. In Phillips’ view, there are two degrees of deontic force with which the principles can be understood: (i) *rational permission* and (ii) *rational requirement*.

(i) Rational permission

If we understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence as granting *only* rational permission, then such principles *simply* allow individual human beings to perform actions in accordance with the principles in question. In this case, it would seem that when the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence conflict, one would be permitted to act in either of the two ways. (Phillips 2011: 116) Conflict-mitigating interpretations, Phillips claims, understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence in this way. (Phillips 2011: 135) Phillips suggests that there are two types of conflict-mitigating interpretations. I will call them *standard conflict-mitigating* interpretations and *enhanced conflict-mitigating* interpretations.  

The standard conflict-mitigating view claims that when the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence conflict, performing either act is *equally* permissible. However, as Phillips

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42 Phillips suggests this distinction in “Sidgwick, Dualism and Indeterminacy in Practical Reason,” (Phillips 1998: 60)
actually explains, if we claim that it is rationally permissible to act in accordance with either Rational Egoism or Utilitarianism, rationality must also permit “any action which can be justified as giving *some extra weight* to one’s own interest but otherwise considering everyone’s interests equally”. (Phillips 1998: 60; my emphasis) Phillips suggests that if in case of conflict it is permissible to act either as Egoism or as Utilitarianism requires, it must also be permissible to hold a *hybrid position*, in which we *rationally* give different *weights* to the dictates of Utilitarianism and Egoism, being permitted to act in either of the ways when there is no conflict. When they conflict, we can prioritize one dictate over the other so long as both dictates do not have the same strength. Any enhanced conflict-mitigating interpretation holds such *hybrid position*.

(ii) Rational requirement

If we understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence as imposing a rational requirement, accepting the principles implies a much stronger claim: one is *rationally required* to act in accordance with such principles; their dictates are binding. (Phillips 2011: 134) Conflict-enhancing interpretations understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence in this way. Phillips explains that, according to conflict-enhancing views, the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism is to be understood as a conflict between two *ultimate norms*: the norm of Rational Egoism dictating to maximize one’s own well-being and the norm of Utilitarianism dictating to impartially maximize everyone’s well-being. Phillips claims:

Ultimate norm: A norm is an ultimate norm if one is rationally required to do anything it … requires. (Philips 1998: 59)

If the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence are understood as ultimate norms, and it is demonstrated, as Sidgwick demonstrates, that such principles conflict, then accepting both
principles at the same time can entail a contradiction. Whether in fact accepting the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence with “the deontic force of requirement” necessarily entails a contradiction depends on how one understands the content of such principles. (Phillips 2011: 116)

II. Content

Phillips explains that the content of the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence can be understood in two ways: (i) exclusive and (ii) inclusive. (Phillips 2011: 116)

(i) Exclusive principles

When the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence are understood as exclusive ultimate norms, Phillips explains, then if the two principles conflict, by definition, only one can be true; the other needs to be either modified or rejected. (Phillips 2011: 116) Understood exclusively, the principles would claim that it is irrational to sacrifice my own happiness for the sake of the happiness of others and that it is irrational to not sacrifice my own happiness for the sake of the general happiness of the whole. (Phillips 2011: 117) The contradiction, then, is necessary. I call these views first-order conflict-enhancing views.

(ii) Inclusive principles

When the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence are understood as inclusive ultimate norms, even if the two principles seem to conflict, the conflict would not be effective until, given the facts, the dictates of Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism do conflict, in which case both norms cannot be accepted at the same time. In this case, the contradiction would only occur if regarding my own happiness as the ultimate good is practically incompatible with regarding the happiness of the whole as the ultimate good. I call these views second-order conflict-enhancing views.
An example may clarify the distinction between conflict-enhancing and conflict-mitigating views:

_Airport Dilemma:_ A drone flying over Gatwick Airport, London, forces to divert all flights going to that airport. Insofar as England only has so many airports, these other airports quickly become saturated, forcing other flights to land in airports situated in nearby countries. In MSY airport in New Orleans, there is only _one_ flight left that has been given permission to land in England, and the plane has only _one_ spot left. You and a stranger are in two parallel lines, waiting to be called to book the last seat in this flight. You are both at the front of your respective lines, and the last spot could be for either of you. You start talking. You tell him that you have received an offer to teach at a very prestigious university near London and that you have been told by the university that, if you make it to the interview, you will be given the job. It is your dream job at your dream university; job openings at such university occur very rarely. If you receive the position, you will be more successful, and you would have, during the rest of your career, both social relations and a sense of fulfillment that you would not have had if you were not hired. If you do not make it to the interview, they will give the job to another person. The stranger tells you that he needs to fly to London to undergo surgery. He has an illness, which only a hospital in London has the means to cure. If he undergoes the surgery, he will survive, and he will live for many years. If he does not make it to London, he will need to reschedule, and he will need to wait another year. He might not survive into that year. At that moment, the attendant says: “Next!”
What ought you to do? If you act in accordance with the Principle of Prudence, you ought to take the spot in the plane and maximize your own welfare. If you act in accordance with the Principle of Rational Benevolence, you ought to regard the welfare of the stranger as much as your own. Considering that his life is at stake, and that if you would not take the last flight, you would only lose the chance to get a job, it is plausible that the Principle of Rational Benevolence would dictate you to sacrifice your own welfare in benefit of the stranger. This conflict expresses Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason.

Conflict-mitigating and conflict-enhancing interpretations disagree on how to understand this conflict. Conflict-mitigating interpretations understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence as granting only rational permission. In particular, according to standard conflict-mitigating interpretations, in Airport Dilemma, you would be permitted to either take the spot or to give the spot to the stranger: both acts would be regarded as equally right. Enhancing conflict-mitigating interpretations, instead, would permit you to either give more strength to the Principle of Prudence or to give more strength to the Principle of Rational Benevolence. You would be permitted to act in accordance with both, but acting in accordance with one of the principles would be more rational than acting in accordance with the other.

Conflict-enhancing interpretations, on the other hand, understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence as each requiring you to act in accordance with their dictates. In Airport Dilemma, insofar as acting in accordance with the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence at the same time is practically impossible, all conflict-enhancing interpretations would conceive the two principles as contradictory.\textsuperscript{43} Practical Reason, then, according to these views, could not determine univocally what you ought to do.

\textsuperscript{43} As I have indicated, conflict-enhancing interpretations can be divided in two types: some understand the principles as exclusive norms, others as inclusive norms. Understood as exclusive norms, the Principles of
Phillips explains that, according to conflict-enhancing interpretations, *Practical Reason* - in what Sidgwick would have called its philosophical phase – *is incoherent*: it gives at the same time two contradictory dictates, leaving the person unable to determine what her Duty is. According to conflict-enhancing interpretations, then, “the conflict is one we cannot live with”. (Phillips 1998: 59) According to conflict-mitigating-interpretations, on the other hand, *Practical Reason is only indeterminate*.

Keeping all this in mind, we can now give the following definitions:

First-order conflict-enhancing views: Views that assume that principles command rational requirements. If two different principles conflict, the principles are necessarily contradictory.

Second-order conflict-enhancing views: Views that assume that principles mandate rational requirements. If two different principles conflict, the principles are contradictory only if they also practically conflict.

Standard conflict-mitigating views: Views that assume that principles grant only rational permission. If two different principles conflict, one would be equally permitted to act in both ways: both acts would be equally right.

Prudence and Rational Benevolence would be *contradictory*, independently of whether the principles practically conflict; understood as inclusive norms, the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence are contradictory *only* if their dictates practically conflict.
Enhanced conflict-mitigating views: Views that assume that principles grant only rational permission. If two different principles conflict, one is permitted to give more strength to one of the principles.

Conflict-enhancing and conflict-mitigating interpretations, in understanding the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence differently, attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics in different ways. However, both interpretations accept Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, and they attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics within the structure of Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument.

First, all conflict-enhancing interpretations that claim that the antecedent of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is true – clause (4) in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument: two valid rational procedures yield different principles –, understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence as imposing equally binding incommensurable requirements. In this sense, they claim that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence theoretically conflict – clause (5) in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument. To ensure that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is not violated – clause (7) in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument –, then, they need to show that Prudence and Rational Benevolence do not practically conflict – against clause (6). However, as Sidgwick learned, showing the practical harmony of Prudence and Rational Benevolence is not an easy task. Precisely, I believe Sidgwick defended a conflict-enhancing view. And this is the reason why he found, and could not solve, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics.

William Frankena and David Brink also defend a conflict-enhancing interpretation. However, they assume that the Dualism of Practical Reason expresses a conflict between a rational theory – namely, Rational Egoism – and a moral theory – namely, Utilitarianism. In this way, they deny from the beginning that two valid rational procedures yield different principles – they deny
clause (4) in Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument. Why? Because, even though they accept a conflict-enhancing interpretation, they do not want to give in to the possibility that Practical Reason may not be as reliable as they would want. In this sense, although they understand the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism in its full force, they reject to even give in to the possibility that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics occurs in the first place. Instead, they only attempt to solve what I have called the Profoundest Problem of Morality.

Second, conflict-mitigating interpretations already assume that different valid rational procedures yield two different principles that do not practically nor theoretically conflict – that is, they accept clause (4) of Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument, but they deny clauses (5) and (6), ensuring that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is not violated. On the one hand, the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence do not practically conflict insofar as they do not issue requirements but permissions. Hence, even if these principles dictate actions that cannot be performed at the same time, the practical conflict does not occur because one is not required to perform both actions. In principle, one is permitted to act in both ways. On the other hand, to guarantee that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence do not theoretically conflict, conflict-mitigating views just need to show that these principles are commensurable or mutually consistent. Insofar as these views already conceive Practical Reason as indeterminate, it is not difficult for them to show that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence do not theoretically conflict. With these views, then, the solution of the conflict between Prudence and Rational Benevolence, and the solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, is confined to decide what strength will one give to these two different principles and provide a justification why one has given weight to one principle or the other.

It is time now to recapitulate. While conflict-enhancing interpretations understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence with its full force – deontic force of requirement –
and then they attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics *practically*, conflict-mitigating interpretations start off watering-down the dictates of the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence to simply show that these principles do not theoretically conflict. In this way, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is watered-down to only decide what we have *most* reasons to do, hoping that it would not undermine morality. This is why I am inclined to believe that while conflict-enhancing views understand the Profoundest Problem in a way that actually demands a *profound* solution, conflict-mitigating interpretations offer a solution to a problem that, as far as I can see, is not *the* Profoundest Problem of Ethics.
In Chapter 3, I present some of the classical attempts to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. I consider the solutions of William Frankena, David Brink, Derek Parfit, Owen McLeod, David Phillips, Roger Crisp, and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek. To be able to understand their solutions, it is crucial to first explain how they understand the relation between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence, and their meaning, and also how they understand the Dualism of Practical Reason and the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. I attempt to show, then, that the type of solution that such philosophers offer can be derived from certain interpretative claims about the Dualism of Practical Reason. I believe that if we pay attention to such claims, the interpretations and solutions offered by these authors can be grouped in different sets, showing that in the end there are only two main interpretative views of the Profoundest Problem, that correspond to Phillips’ distinction between conflict-enhancing and conflict-mitigating interpretations.

### 3.1. Conflict-enhancing Interpretations

As I have explained, conflict-enhancing interpretations can take two forms: one – fist-order – in which the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence are understood as exclusive norms – independently of the facts –; and the other – first-order – in which the principles are understood inclusively – considering the facts. William Frankena and David Brink both defend a second-order conflict-enhancing interpretation of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason.\(^{44}\)

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44 Phillips suggests that Henry S. Richardson can also be read in a similar way. (Phillips 1998: 65; also, Richardson 1991) I have not found any author arguing for a first-order conflict-enhancing view. I think that this is not accidental: if one understands the principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence as conflicting first-order ultimate norms, the Profoundest Problem cannot, in principle, be solved.
3.1.1. William Frankena

3.1.1.1. Frankena’s Interpretation of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

William Frankena understands the Profoundest Problem of Ethics in terms of what Parfit called the moralist’s problem. At the same time, Frankena understands what Sidgwick called the Dualism of Practical Reason from an externalist second-order conflict-enhancing view: conceiving therefore the principles of Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism as ultimate norms that are contradictory only when they practically conflict. It is not surprising, then, that Frankena tries to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, arguing that the dictates of Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism do not practically conflict. In particular, Frankena claims that in the actual state of society, promoting one’s own welfare actually coincides with promoting everyone’s welfare. My objection against Frankena is two-fold. First, I argue that Frankena misses what is really at stake in the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. Second, I argue that Frankena’s solution of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is not satisfactory.

I. Frankena’s second-order conflict-enhancing interpretation

Frankena defends a second-order conflict-enhancing view of the Dualism of Practical Reason: conceiving therefore the principles of Egoism and Utilitarianism as ultimate norms which are susceptible only to be practically contradictory. In his article “Sidgwick and Practical Dualism,” Frankena claims:

[It] is important to understand that for Sidgwick the two principles in question are not merely intuitive or self-evident; each of them is also an ultimate principle of actual or absolute duty in Ross’s sense. Neither of them is a principle that holds only prima facie, or ceteris paribus, or from a certain point of view. Neither of them admits of any exceptions or of being overridden by the other. (Frankena 1974: 456)
Frankena is aware that Sidgwick presents the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence as self-evident from an individual and a universal point of view, respectively. Frankena’s claim, then, needs to be understood not exegetically but philosophically. In his view, what Sidgwick labels as the Profoundest Problem of Ethics would only constitute a profoundest problem if Sidgwick believed “that both principles are seen to be absolute and be rational from the same point of view”. (Frankena 1974: 456) Similarly, Frankena claims:

For Sidgwick, the two principles are both authoritative, obligatory, and rational as such, independently of one another, and equally so. (Frankena 1992: 194)

From these claims, one can only conclude that Frankena believes that Sidgwick defended a conflict-enhancing interpretation of the Dualism of Practical Reason; in which two rational ultimate norms – namely, the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence – conflict. However, Frankena suggests that it is only when, considering the facts of the world, these principles result in conflicting acts that Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason entails a Profoundest Problem of Ethics. This suggests that Frankena comprehends Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason as a second-order conflict-enhancing view.

For instance, Frankena claims:

Is there a “contradiction” in Sidgwick’s system …? I think the answer … is that there is a contradiction only if Sidgwick’s two principles may and do conflict in practice. There is no problem if they never call for different courses of conduct. (Frankena 1992: 194)

Frankena explains that, when these principles are conceived as second-order valid ultimate norms, Sidgwick has only certain alternatives at hand to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics.
In particular, Frankena claims that Sidgwick has two alternatives. On the one hand, Sidgwick can accept, as he ultimately does, that there is a fundamental contradiction in our moral reasoning when dictating to us what we ought to do, while waiting either for a possible future resolution of the contradiction or for a future harmony between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence. On the other hand, Sidgwick can postulate such harmony, either because (i) he appeals to theology, or because (ii) he appeals to a state of society in which one aims at his own greatest happiness by aiming at everyone’s greatest happiness. Frankena suggests that Sidgwick is hoping that the appeal to theology will solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, although he himself – Sidgwick – could not demonstrate it in The Methods of Ethics. (Frankena 1974: 458, 467) Even though I profoundly disagree with Frankena’s assumption that Sidgwick would have wanted to solve the Profoundest Problem by appealing to God, I believe that Frankena’s description of the options available for Sidgwick to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is revealing.⁴⁵

It reveals precisely that Frankena is, with Sidgwick, accepting Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. When accepting these assumptions and understanding the Dualism of Practical Reason under a second-order conflict-enhancing interpretation in which the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence are conceived as conflicting ultimate norms, the only option left to not violate the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is to show that the dictates of the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence practically coincide. This is why, I suggest, Frankena considers that Sidgwick can only solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics either by (i) appealing to a graceful God that will compensate our sacrifices in a future life or by (ii) appealing to a state of society in which the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence coincide. As I have explained,

⁴⁵ I profoundly disagree with this claim. I agree with Parfit when he claims that “Sidgwick doubted that we shall have a future life”. (Parfit 2011: 142) As I have explained in Chapter 2, I believe Sidgwick is indicating that it would be a mistake to try to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics by appealing to theology, as it would make Ethics dependent on theology. (507)
Frankena suggests that Sidgwick opts for option (i). Frankena attempts to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics by appealing to option (ii).

II. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics as the moralist’s problem

Before I explain Frankena’s solution to his Profoundest Problem, it is crucial to understand that Frankena does not understand the Dualism of Practical Reason as Sidgwick does. First of all, Frankena conceives morality from an externalist standpoint: Frankena denies that a necessary connection between morality – in its narrow sense – and rationality exists. In Frankena’s view, then, it might not be always rational to act in accordance with morality and, in principle, the dictates of rationality and morality may not coincide. Frankena understands the Dualism of Practical Reason precisely in terms of a conflict between rationality and morality – in its narrower sense:

[My] view would still involve a kind of dualism of practical reason, between the … moral and the rational …, a dualism not between two basic ethical principles or principles of rationality … but between the principle(s) of ethics … and the principle[s] of rationality. (Frankena 1992: 196)

Frankena, then, “distinguishes between the ethical or moral and the ultimately practical or rational.” (Frankena 1992: 196) And he understands his Profoundest Problem as expressing the possibility that morality might be undermined by rationality. It is in these grounds that I suggest that Frankena conceives the Profoundest Problem in terms of what Parfit called the moralist’s problem – in my terminology, the Profoundest Problem of Morality. However, Frankena’s solution to his Profoundest Problem indicates that he does conceive the principles of – rational – Prudence and – moral – Benevolence as ultimate norms. As I explain below, Frankena considers that in the actual state of society, the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence actually coincide; he concludes that these facts about the world render the Profoundest Problem of Morality unproblematic. If this
is so, Frankena’s own solution to the Profoundest Problem of Morality suggests that Frankena himself also holds a second-order conflict-enhancing view.

### 3.1.1.2. Frankena’s Solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

In Franken’s view, appealing to God – as Sidgwick allegedly attempted – is no longer needed to solve the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism. Citing Trilling, Frankena suggests:

> Sidgwick’s… dilemma… between Interest and Duty no longer engages us … because the modern morality, in its powerful imagination of the sources of life and the need to obtain control over them, denies the contradiction between Interest and Duty. Typically in our culture, … the individual … assumes that there is a continuity between what he desires for himself and what he desires for others. (Frankena 1974: 467)

In Frankena’s view, thus, in the actual conditions of human life, different from those of Sidgwick’s, the practical harmony between the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence might already be guaranteed. In this sense, rationality does not undermine morality insofar as acting in accordance with prudential principles coincides with acting in accordance with moral principles. Frankena suggests, then, that in the current state of society, promoting one’s own welfare is compatible with promoting everyone’s welfares.

If this is so, we can summarize Frankena’s interpretation as follows: Frankena considers that there is a Dualism of Practical Reason between two ultimate norms; one (or more) of morality and another (or more) of rationality, which are contradictory only if the ends they dictate to promote do not harmonize in practice. However, as in the current state of society, they do harmonize in practice, the principles of rationality and morality coincide, and therefore, Sidgwick’s problem – understood as the moralist’s problem – does not concern us any longer. It is important to realize, again, that it is Frankena’s second-order conflict-enhancing interpretation of the Dualism of Practical Reason that determines the solution that he offers to the Profoundest Problem of Morality,
that is: postulating that the facts are such as to allow the coincidence of two, otherwise potentially contradictory ultimate dictates.

3.1.1.3. Objections to William Frankena

Frankena misses what is primarily at stake for Sidgwick when defining the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. If my suggestion that Sidgwick is accepting Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions is correct, then, for Sidgwick, what is primary at stake when warning us about the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is not that Utilitarianism may be undermined, but instead that Practical Reason is not able to rationally give us a univocal answer about what we ought to do. Sidgwick considers that Practical Reason yields two ultimate norms that, insofar as they both theoretically and practically conflict, should not be valid at the same time. However, he cannot but confess that both principles are valid, and thus conclude that Practical Reason is not as reliable as we once thought. It is, I have explained, this doubt upon the reliability of Practical Reason that makes the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism profound, not primarily that Utilitarianism might be undermined.

In this sense, Frankena is mistaken in perceiving the Profoundest Problem of Ethics primarily as the moralist’s problem. The question is: why does Frankena perceive it in this way? In my view, it is for two reasons: first, because Frankena is an externalist about morality. In this sense, it is in principle open to question if the rational authority of morality is guaranteed. Second, I believe that Frankena is constrained by the acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, while at the same time not wanting to give in to the possibility that Practical Reason is incoherent. Let me explain this step-by-step. I have explained that Frankena conceives the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence as second-order ultimate norms. As such, if he would discover that these principles practically conflict, he would need to admit, with Sidgwick, that Practical
Reason yields contradictory principles about what we ought to do. This would not only undermine morality but Practical Reason itself.\footnote{I provide more evidence for this objection when I object to Brink’s position.}

In fact, Frankena’s solution to his Profoundest Problem does not hold. The appeal to the actual state of society, unfortunately, does not guarantee that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence always coincide. Sidgwick himself admitted that, even in his time, in any tolerable state of society acting in accordance with the principle of benevolence may \textit{generally} likely coincide “with the attainment of the greatest happiness possible for the” agent. (498) However, this is not what needs to be shown. Without an empirical proof able to ensure the universality and the completeness of the coincidence between Prudence and Benevolence, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is not solved. It would only take one occasion in which these principles require incompatible actions, and the Profoundest Problem of Ethics would reappear in its full force. Let us take the example that I explained above: Airport Dilemma. In that case, it is not at all clear that sacrificing your dream job would coincide with the attainment of your greatest happiness. If so, how would Frankena convince the radical Egoist that he ought to leave the last spot in the last flight to London to the dying stranger? The answer is simple: Frankena could not.

\textbf{3.1.2. David Brink}

\textbf{3.1.2.1. Brink’s Interpretation of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics}

David Brink himself admits that he follows William Frankena in understanding the Dualism of Practical Reason from an externalist standpoint. (Brink 1988: 291) I suggest that Brink, knowingly or not, follows Frankena much further. In my view, like Frankena, Brink defends a second-order conflict-enhancing interpretation of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason, a dualism that he also conceives as the conflict between a \textit{rational} principle – Prudence – and a \textit{moral} principle –
Benevolence – constituting the moralist’s problem; a problem that Brink also attempts to solve – as Frankena did, though more sophisticatedly than he – by arguing that the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence *practically* coincide. I argue that Brink does not solve his Profoundest Problem of Morality. First, I argue that, like Frankena, in conceiving the Profoundest Problem of Ethics as the moralist’s problem, Brink misses what is *really* at stake in the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. Second, I argue that, in his attempt to solve the moralist’s problem, Brink commits an equivocation: understanding the notion *person* in two incommensurable ways. Third, I argue that, even if my first and second objections would not be sound, Brink does not satisfactorily show that the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence coincide. If my objections are sound, Brink left the Profoundest Problem of Ethics unresolved.

I. Brink’s second-order conflict-enhancing interpretation

David Phillips suggests that Brink ought to be read as taking a conflict-mitigating approach to the Dualism of Practical Reason. (Phillips 2011: 137) I profoundly disagree with Phillips. In particular, Brink indicates that he needs to be read as holding a conflict-enhancing interpretation of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason when he argues that Sidgwick was – or ought to have been – an externalist. Externalism, as defined by Brink in opposition with Internalism, “denies the internal connection between morality and rationality; it says that the rationality of moral considerations depends upon factors external to the concept of morality”. (Brink 1988: 292; Brink 1992: 202-204; see also Phillips 1998: 61-62)

Keeping this distinction in mind, Brink explains, the Dualism of Practical Reason could be understood in two ways. On the one hand, when accepting Internalism, the dualism represents “a
conflict between competing moral [and thus also rational] theories”; on the other hand, when accepting Externalism, the dualism represents “a conflict between (the utilitarian’s account of) morality and (an egoist theory of) rationality”. (Brink 1988: 291)

Brink argues that the Dualism of Practical Reason cannot be understood from an internalist standpoint, because when doing so, the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence would “make incompatible claims about the same subject matter”. (Brink, 1992; 205) According to Brink, then, if one does not want to accept from the beginning that Practical Reason is incoherent, yielding self-evident and inconsistent intuitions about what we ought to do, one needs to be committed to an externalist approach to Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason. (Brink 1988: 304-305) Accepting the externalist reading, Brink suggests that to accept the Dualism of Practical Reason does not entail accepting that Egoism and Utilitarianism are mutually inconsistent.

If Brink argument in favor of an externalist reading of the Dualism of Practical Reason is analyzed properly, it is clear that Brink seems to be accepting certain – unarticulated – assumptions about the nature of Practical Reason, and about the deontic force of the principles that Practical Reason yields. First of all, only if Brink understands the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence with deontic force of requirement, he would argue that the – conflicting – Principles of Prudence and Benevolence are mutually inconsistent – with deontic force of permission, the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence are not necessarily inconsistent. Similarly, only if Brink is accepting Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, he would conclude that the conflict between Prudence and Benevolence – understood as ultimate norms – entails that Practical Reason is incoherent – and that it could not be trusted. Brink’s understanding of the Dualism of Practical Reason from an externalist approach suggests, then, that he conceives the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence as ultimate norms. Brink’s attempt to solve this conflict, suggesting that the Principles of Prudence
and Benevolence may practically coincide, suggests that Brink defends a second-order conflict-enhancing interpretation.

II. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics as the moralist’s problem

Brink suggests that the externalist reading of the Dualism of Practical Reason compels us to understand the conflict between Egoism and Utilitarianism as a conflict between a rational – egoistic – and a moral – utilitarian – theory, ultimately “raising the issue about the rational authority of morality”. (Brink 1992: 204) According to Brink, Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason urges us to take seriously, and answer, the amoralist sceptic question: Why should I do what morality requires? (Brink 1988: 303-305) Brink’s reading of The Methods of Ethics, then, grasps at least one of the worries that Sidgwick certainly had, a worry that Parfit expressed in the moralist’s problem. (Sidgwick 1981: 6; Parfit 2011: 143) Brink suggests that to solve the Profoundest Problem, as he understands it, he only needs to show that morality – namely, Utilitarianism and the Principle of Benevolence – is not undermined by rationality – namely, Rational Egoism and the Principle of Prudence. Taking into account that Brink conceives the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence as second-order ultimate norms, the solution of Brink’s Profoundest Problem – of Morality – demands showing that these principles practically coincide.47

3.1.2.2. Brink’s Solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

David Brink is a rational egoist. As an agent-biased theory of rationality, Rational Egoism requires one to be initially weary to sacrifice one’s own welfare in benefit of another, even if the other’s

47 This indicates that Brink is also accepting what I have called the Fundamental Postulates of Morality. In this sense, to solve the Profoundest Problem of Morality he shows that the dictates of Morality practically coincide with the dictates of Rationality – against clause (IV) of what I call Sidgwick’s Underlying Preoccupation.
benefit would be greater than one’s own. As a temporally-neutral theory, Rational Egoism requires one to sacrifice a present benefit for a greater one in the future, even if it is a distant future and the future benefit is slightly greater than the present one. ⁴⁸ According to Rational Egoism’s hybrid structure, then, while it makes all the difference on whom a benefit falls – me or not me –, it does not make any difference when it falls – as long as it contributes to my own overall welfare. (Brink 1997A: 101) Brink suggests that Rational Egoism is ultimately grounded in the separateness of persons.

I. The Separateness of Persons

In particular, Brink focuses on what he calls the normative aspect of the separateness of persons, according to which being a separate person “requires me to adopt patterns of concern that exhibit a bias towards myself”. ⁴⁹ (Brink 1997A: 103)

As Brink claims:

[P]art of what it is for me to be a distinct, temporally extended person is for me to have a particular perspective on the world that displays concern for my past and future self that is not proportional to the impersonal value of my activities. But then part of what it is for me to be a separate person is for me to be unwilling to sacrifice my interests without appropriate compensation. (Brink 1997A: 105)

Being a separate entity involves, for persons, being the epicenter of action of the entity that I am now in a way that I form a particular – first-person – perspective on the world. (Brink 1997A: 103)

And as Brink explains, to have and act from such particular perspective “involves forming and

⁴⁸ David Brink, following Sidgwick, labels this feature of Rational Egoism the Compensation Principle. (Brink 1997A: 108; also, Sidgwick 1889: 483) The Compensation Principle states that a sacrifice of one’s own welfare is rational if it is at some time compensated by an equivalent or greater benefit for me at another moment in time.

⁴⁹ For Sidgwick, claims Brink, to accept the separateness of persons is to claim that the distinction between me and any other individual is metaphysically and normatively deep. (Brink 1997A: 103) Brink does not explicitly deny the metaphysical aspect.
acting on intentions and goals in ways that display self-concern” for the past and future of both my perspective on the world and the epicenter of action that I am. (Brink 1997A: 103) In other words, being a separate person entails that I act and think now as a I were a person that persists in time. Part of what it means to be a distinct person that acts from a particular perspective on the world, then, is that I display concern in a way that, while I do not conceive the distinction between me now and myself in the past or the future as fundamental, I do conceive the distinction between me and other persons as fundamental.

According to Brink, the separateness of persons justifies Rational Egoism’s agent-relative, temporally-neutral structure against philosophers, such as Parfit, who claim that Rational Egoism’s hybrid structure is arbitrary. (Parfit 1987: 139; also, Sidgwick 1981: 418) At the same time, Brink’s appeal to the separateness of persons safeguards Rational Egoism against another objection raised by Parfit: that Rational Egoism is grounded in a conception of personal identity that is at odds with another conception of identity that characterizes more appropriately, at least according to Parfit, what we really are.

II. A reductionist account of personal identity

Brink argues that, insofar as Rational Egoism’s hybrid structure is not grounded, as Parfit assumed, in a common-sensical conception of personal identity, Rational Egoism is not vulnerable to Parfit’s objection. However, Brink goes a step further: He argues that Rational Egoism is compatible with a reductionist account of personal identity. (Brink 1997A: 96) Why? Because in Brink’s view, if he is able to show that Rational Egoism and Reductionism are compatible, he will be able to use later Reductionism to show that our interests ultimately are – as Frankena suggested – continuous with the interests of others. In this sense, Brink believes that he will able to solve the Profoundest
Problem of Morality if he can show that Rational Egoism and a reductionist conception of identity are compatible.

Let us start by saying a few words about Reductionism, a conception of personal identity presented by Parfit in his masterpiece *Reasons and Persons*. Reductionism, explains Parfit, states “(1) that the fact of a person’s identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular facts. [And] (2) that these facts can be described without either presupposing the identity of this person, or explicitly claiming that the experiences of this person’s life are had by this person, or even explicitly claiming that this person exists. These facts can be described in an *impersonal* way.” (Parfit 1987: 210)

In particular, Parfit argues that a person’s identity can simply be explained in terms of the continuity over time of certain psychological connections between experiences and memories; without the need to appeal to any further fact or to assume that these psychological connections are experienced by a person who exists independently of these experiences and memories. In this sense, Parfit claims that to trace the continuity of a person’s identity over time, it is only necessary a *psychological criterion* that traces certain psychological continuity. (Parfit 1987: 204) Now, Parfit defines *psychological continuity* as “the holding of overlapping chains of strong [psychological] connectedness”, and *psychological connectedness* as “the holding of particular direct psychological connections”.50 (Parfit 1987: 206)

When accepting a reductionist account, I can only assume that I have now certain experiences and memories, that I can trace these experiences and memories in the past, and that different but continuous experiences and memories will be had for future selves that will be related to me only in terms of the connections between our memories and experiences. However, Parfit explains

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50 The psychological criterion states that “X today is one and the same person as Y at some past time if and only if (2) X is psychologically continuous with Y, … and (4) it has not taken a ‘branching form’. (5) Personal identity over time just consists in the holding of facts like (2) or (4)”. (Parfit 1987: 207)
that insofar as experiences and memories now are increasingly less strongly connected with past or future experiences and memories the further these experiences and memories are from me-now, psychological continuity decreases over time.\footnote{My experience now of the screen of my computer is strongly connected to my experience five minutes ago of the screen of the computer. I can trace the connections between these experiences and claim that they are strongly connected. I cannot say the same about my experience when I saw my first computer screen when I was five. I may still trace certain connections between my experiences, but they will be much weaker than the connections between my experiences five minutes apart.} And insofar as psychological continuity decreases over time, psychological continuity, under the reductionist view, is a matter of degree. Personal identity is not. Psychological continuity and personal identity, then, do not coincide.

Keeping this in mind, continues Parfit, insofar as a person’s identity only consists in the holding of certain psychological connections, it is about these connections, which Parfit names as \textit{Relation R}, about which one ought to be concerned; not personal identity in itself.\footnote{Parfit shows so by appealing to hypothetical cases in which psychological continuity takes a branching form. Parfit argues that, in those cases, what matters is not identity, but Relation R. This is Parfit’s argument to show that his own conception of identity undermines the conception of personal identity upon which Rational Egoism rests. (Parfit 1987: 245-263) Parfit believed that Reductionism cast doubt upon Rational Egoism’s temporally-neutral structure. Insofar as (a) I cannot assume, as non-reductionism does, that I am always the same person with an extended identity over time, (b) I can only assume that I have now experiences and memories, (c) it is Relation R that really matters, not personal identity, and (d) psychological continuity is a matter of degree such that I am not \textit{fully} the same person than myself in the past nor in the future; then (x) it is not clear that I ought now to be equally concerned with myself now than “myself” at another moment in time. If psychological continuity is indeed a matter of degree, the concern that I ought to have \textit{now} for another self – related to me – at another future moment in time is \textit{proportional} to the strength of the psychological connection between myself now and “myself” at that other time. This establishes a \textit{Discount Rate} for concern that, pace Rational Egoism’s temporally-neutral structure, indicates that it is \textit{not} rational for me to sacrifice a present benefit for a greater one in the future. (Brink 1997A, 118)}

Brink suggests that Rational Egoism and Reductionism are compatible. As I have explained, Brink claims that Rational Egoism’s agent-biased, temporally-neutral, structure rests on the hybrid patterns of self-concern that are involved in one being a separate person who acts and thinks from a first-person perspective in the world, not in a non-reductionist conception of personal identity.
This entails that Rational Egoism’s hybrid structure is not necessarily incompatible with a reductionist view about personal identity. In fact, Brink suggests that it is possible to claim, with Reductionism, that a person’s identity over time consists in the holding of certain, more particular facts that can be described in an impersonal way and at the same time claim, with Rational Egoism, that it is only rational to be concerned about my welfare as a whole.

Now, the key to Brink’s argument is how one ought to conceive oneself at the time of displaying concern toward oneself in the past or in the future.

Parfit assumes that I can only be concerned about my past and future from my position in the present. From my temporally-relative position – in the present –, my experiences and memories now are more strongly connected with experiences and memories of temporally-adjacent selves than the experiences and memories of distant selves. Insofar as I cannot assume that my identity persists over time, Parfit assumes that I have more reasons to be concerned for my temporally-adjacent selves than my temporally-distant selves. This Discount Rate would undermine the temporally-neutral structure of Rational Egoism.

Brink does not deny Parfit’s claim that I can only be concerned about my past and future from my position in the present. However, by appealing to the separateness of persons, Brink suggests that part of what it means to be a separate person is that I can only act and think from my position in the present by adopting patterns of concern that exhibit a bias toward myself as a whole. Even though Brink admits that “practical reasoning is necessarily temporally indexed”, and that what it is rational for me to do is always “on the basis of my current beliefs, aims and values”, this does not entail that I ought to regard myself as an agent with the same temporal extension than the beliefs, aims, and values which ground my reasons for action. (Brink 1997A: 111) Quite the opposite. Part of what it means to be a separate person is to act and think now as an entity projected
to the future and prolonged to the past that “will persist long enough to perform actions or receive the benefits of actions”.  
(Brink 1997A. 112)

If Brink’s argument is sound, Rational Egoism’s structure is compatible with Parfit’s Reductionism: while Rational Egoism’s structure makes a claim about the patterns of concern that persons adopt as agents, Reductionism makes a claim about the continuity of a person’s identity over time. In this sense, Rational Egoism conceives persons from the first-person perspective when appealing to the separateness of persons, and Reductionism conceives persons from an impersonal point of view when claiming that a person’s identity can be described by only appealing to facts that can be described impartially. They may conceive person’s differently, but they are not making claims about the same subject matter. This is why Rational Egoism and Reductionism can be compatible.

III. A reductionist account of welfare

Brink suggests that Rational Egoism is only able to respond to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics insofar as it accepts – pace Sidgwick, which regarded welfare as happiness – an objective conception of welfare that identifies a person’s welfare with the possibility to exercise certain capacities for practical deliberations – such as “formulating, assessing, revising, choosing, and implementing projects and goals”. Brink follows here “an important philosophical tradition that insists that we ought to modify our pretheoretical understanding of self-interest on metaphysical grounds”. (Brink

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53 Brink explains that psychological continuity as defined by Parfit “demonstrates only a fact about the relation among the parts of my life, not a fact about the relation between these parts and me.” (Brink 1997A: 121) Only if I conceive myself as a fictional system of coherent phenomena experienced by what Brink labels as person-slices or a person-segments, it follows that reductionism implies a discount rate for concern. However, Brink claims “it is persons, and not person-slices or segments, who are agents” able to be concerned about their past and future selves. (Brink 1997A: 121)
According to this tradition, my interests are not only *causally*, but also *metaphysically*, interdependent with the interests of others.\(^5^4\)

Brink labels this view *metaphysical* egoism. According to this view, insofar as a person’s welfare depends on her possibilities to exercise certain deliberative capacities, and insofar as it is not possible for her to develop these capacities without interacting with others, people’s interests are metaphysically interdependent. In other words, insofar as it is not possible for me to promote my own overall welfare without relying on the deliberative capacities of others, then it is not possible for me to promote my own welfare on the whole without promoting, derivatively but not instrumentally, the welfare of others.

Brink grounds his metaphysical egoism – a conception about welfare – in Reductionism.\(^5^5\) From a reductionist view, under Brink’s interpretation of Parfit’s psychological criterion, a *person* is nothing more than the holding of certain *deliberative* connections between continuous selves at different moments in time – connections that can be described in an impersonal way. However, Brink argues that insofar as an agent’s deliberative capacities are interdependent with other agents’ deliberative capacities, the agent now might be more continuous with other agents now than to her self in the distant future. (Brink 1997B: 142).

Under Brink’s conception of welfare, then, my welfare is *extended* to – and *continuous with* – the persons with whom I interact. In other words, I cannot separate my welfare from the

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\(^{54}\) This sort of view, explains Brink, “is familiar from the Greek eudaemonist tradition, especially in the work of Plato and Aristotle, and from the British idealist tradition, especially the work of T.H. Green.” (Brink 1997B: 124)

\(^{55}\) Insofar as Brink has shown that Rational Egoism and Reductionism are compatible, Brink assumes that now he can appeal to Reductionism to ground metaphysical egoism. I will show that it is in this step that Brink commits an equivocation. Brink gives three reasons why these deliberative capacities cannot be developed in isolation. First, because my capacities for practical deliberation, and the content of such deliberations, depend on the content of the deliberations of the persons with whom I regularly interact. (Brink 1997B: 149) Second, because interacting with persons similar to me allows me to “appreciate my own qualities from a different perspective”. Third, because interacting with persons different from me contributes to self-criticism, “improv[ing] my own practical deliberations”. (Brink 1997B: 145)
welfare of the people on whom my psychological continuity depends. If this is so, I can only *gradually* separate *my* interests from those on whom my psychological continuity depends, in a similar way that I cannot separate my interests from those of my future selves. In this sense, Brink explains, in some cases what it might be rational to do as a rational egoist is to promote the welfare of the agents with whom I interact to guarantee that I can exercise my capacities for practical deliberation, even if promoting their welfare entails that I need to slightly sacrifice my own welfare.

This, Brink claims, would not undermine Rational Egoism’s agent-relative, temporally-neutral structure. Under the rational egoist’s perspective, acting in this way would be no different from sacrificing my own future minor benefit for a major present benefit.

Brink concludes, then, that under his conception of welfare, and his appeal to Reductionism, the dictates of Rational Egoism are not necessarily incompatible with the dictates of Morality.56 Insofar as my welfare is interdependent with the welfare of others, promoting my own welfare will not necessarily conflict with promoting the welfare of others.

Now, Brink himself admits that his own metaphysical egoism is not *always* able to accommodate other-regarding moral requirements to the egoist’s rationale. Even though he does indicate that interpersonal psychological continuity is not confined to intimates and the circle with which one regularly interacts and that it extends further than we think, Brink admits that, inasmuch as interpersonal psychological continuity may gradually diminish with distant people or people with whom we may never interact, a form of Parfit’s Discount Rate applies to interpersonal concern. (Brink 1997A: 153) Accordingly, there are going to be times in which the rational authority of morality will be undermined. Therefore, Brink’s metaphysical egoism, constructed upon Parfit’s

56 Ultimately, my rational decision will be determined by the degree of connectedness between myself now and myself at other moments in time, and myself now and others.
reductionism, does not achieve the purpose that Brink conceives, and he himself admits that this is so. However, Brink hopes that the Profoundest Problem, as he conceives it – as the moralist’s problem –, can be solved if we take into account that practical reason has both impartial and prudential dimensions. (Brink 1997B: 156; Brink 1997C) Brink hopes, then, that a Principle of Prudence, in which promoting my own welfare metaphorically entails promoting the welfare of others, combined with a Principle of Rational Benevolence, will ultimately coincide with the Principle of Moral Benevolence.

3.1.2.3. Objections to David Brink

As Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer suggest, even if Practical Reason would have both impartial and prudential dimension, Brink’s argument would not prevent Rational Egoism from undermining Morality. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 165-166) Instead, by appealing to different dimensions of Practical Reason to argue that the combination of two rational principles – one prudential, another benevolent – will coincide with one moral – benevolent – principle, Brink unknowingly sinks his account in a deeper problem than the one Sidgwick warned us about.

I. The Profoundest Problem of Rationality and the Dualism of Morality

In this objection, I suggest that Brink’s appeal to two different dimensions of Practical Reason opens the possibility that Brink’s account might be vulnerable to two different dualisms: on the one hand, a dualism between the rational Principle of Prudence and the rational Principle of Benevolence; on the other hand, a dualism between a Moral principle of prudence and a Moral principle of benevolence.

Let us start with a possible conflict between rational Prudence and rational Benevolence, which I label as Brink’s Profoundest Problem of Rationality. Brink suggests that the appeal to a
benevolent principle of rationality is necessary because the Principle of Prudence, even with Brink’s reductionist conception of welfare, does not completely guarantee that promoting everyone’s welfare will always compensate the sacrifices that one might make. As the example Airport Dilemma suggests, it might be possible that Morality requires you to perform an action in which you benefit a stranger that you might not see anymore. In this case, even if in normal conditions you benefit from having people around you with whom you can exercise and develop your capacities for practical deliberation, this – alleged – psychological continuity with others does not assure you that sacrificing your dream job in benefit of the stranger will promote – in the long run – your deliberative capacities. Quite the opposite.

As I explained in the example, getting the job at your dream university would allow you to meet people with whom you have always wanted to interact. Assuming that the conversations with these people would exponentially increase your deliberative capacities, as a rational egoist acting in accordance with the Principle of Prudence, it still would be rational to promote your own welfare, even if that means that the stranger will die. This is why Brink needs to appeal to a rationally benevolent principle.

However, insofar as the Principle of Rational Benevolence qualifies the Principle of Rational Prudence when this principle conflicts with Morality, then, do not the Principles of Rational Benevolence and Rational Prudence conflict? In other words, does not Brink, in his attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem, falls in an equally problematic Profoundest Problem of Rationality that expresses a conflict between two rational ultimate norms? At best, Brink may understand this conflict from a conflict-mitigating interpretation. Similar claims could be made about Morality. If rationality is divided against itself, can it also be the case that Morality has both prudential and impartial dimensions? It is true that Brink suggests that inasmuch as acting as Egoism dictates entails to aim at one’s own good and not that of others, it is difficult to take Egoism as a moral
theory. (Brink 1988: 300-302) Still, this does not mean that it is inconceivable. If so, would need to face also a Dualism of Morality?

II. An Equivocation: two incommensurable notions of person

I have suggested that Brink uses the notion person with different meanings that, at first, seem commensurable insofar as these notions are playing different roles. While Reductionism makes a claim about persons focusing on their identity, the separateness of persons makes a claim about persons focusing in the patterns of concern that persons adopt as agents. Brink answers the Reductionist’s objection appealing to the separateness of persons and showing, precisely, that an agent’s patterns of concern need not be related to a particular view of personal identity. I do not see a fallacy here.

The trouble begins when Brink attempts to ground metaphysical egoism in Reductionism. Metaphysical egoism is a conception about welfare. Therefore, it affects the rational distribution of benefits and harms that Rational Egoism’s hybrid structure defines. With Brink’s attempt to ground metaphysical egoism in Reductionism, then, Brink uses Reductionism not as an account about personal identity, but to make a claim about how Rational Egoism, insofar as it accepts Reductionism and metaphysical egoism, ought to distribute benefits and harms among persons and among time.

With this step, Brink, when talking about the same subject matter – displaying concern –, uses the notion of person with two meanings that are incommensurable. Brink explained that Rational Egoism’s structure finds justification in the first-person perspective on the world of an agent that acts and thinks – deliberates – as a separate temporally-extended entity that cares about herself as a whole. In terms of the separateness of persons, being a person entails being an agent with a first-person point of view that deliberates in a continuous way with myself as an agent in the future.
and in the past.\textsuperscript{57} However, the deliberations that I have now \textit{as a separate person} with the deliberations that I had in the past or that I will have in the future are \textit{connected} only insofar as I am continuous with myself from this first-person perspective on the world. In other words, it is not clear that the connections that hold myself together as a \textit{separate} person could be explained in an impersonal way without losing its normative force, that is, without losing the concern toward myself that the separateness of persons was supposed to guarantee.

It is for this reason that Brink cannot, as he does, appeal to Reductionism to ground metaphysical egoism. Reductionism explains the – deliberative – psychological connections between different selves in the impersonal way that Rational Egoism cannot allow if it wants to keep the normative force that justifies its hybrid structure. Using Reductionism to explain how deliberative connections between different agents ground the metaphysical interdependence between these agents’ welfares is to understand these deliberative connections, and these agents, in two different incommensurable ways – when talking about the same subject matter.

In particular, it is to claim that these agents are concerned, from their first-person point of view, with their own welfare as a whole, but that when they regard this welfare – from a third-person point of view –, they realize that their welfare as a whole includes other agents’ welfare. However, it is not clear why, when they changed to the third-person point of view, they would still regard that they ought to care for their own welfare as a whole: it seems that the reasons they had to care about themselves as temporally-extended entities would lose their force. Similarly, from their first-person point of view, even though they might be able to understand that their welfare is interdependent with the welfare of others, they could not regard this interdependence with others

\footnote{\textsuperscript{57} Brink seemed here to claim, with Korsgaard, that agency cannot be understood, as for instance Hume and Parfit do, as only an “important form of experience”, including “actions and activities among the things that \textit{happen} to us”. (Korsgaard 1987: 102) Instead, Brink seemed to assume that it is only when I conceive my actions and thoughts as something that I \textit{do}, and not that I experience, that self-concern for myself as a temporally extended person with a particular perspective is inseparable from me being a separate, distinct person.}
of the same category than the interdependence that they have with themselves. Brink, then, asks the agent to conceive herself from the first-person perspective to ground the normative force of her agent-relative, temporally-neutral patterns of concern, then to use this strength, from the third-person perspective, to care about others as if they were a part of her own overall welfare; an overall welfare that the agent is only able to conceive from a first-person point of view. In other words, Brink is asking the agent to conceive herself both as a separate person and as a mere holding of psychological connections at the same time. This is, I have argued, not possible.

III. Rational Egoism’s Underlying Problem

Brink’s equivocation is not an accident. In my view, Brink is falling into one of the burdens of accepting Rational Egoism. Rational Egoism is structurally opposed to other-regarding Morality; no matter what theory of welfare one decides to accept. Rational Egoism’s hybrid structure constrains the rational egoist to either ground the agent-relative, temporally-neutral, structure of Rational Egoism in a conception that relies on a first-person point of view in which the relationship with myself is for me all important, or to regard myself from an external point of view – as Sidgwick would say, the point of view of the universe – in which I am only one human being among other human beings. (Sidgwick 1981: 382, 420-421; Brink 1997A: 102; Parfit 1987: 144) It cannot do both. However, it is only when one conceives oneself as one human being among other human beings that other agents’ welfare might be for me as important as my own. In other words, it is only from the point of view of the universe that rationality and other-regarding Morality may coincide.

Even though it might be true that without others one cannot develop one’s capacities for practical deliberations, a necessary normative aspect of forming these capacities is that my relation to them is not impersonal – experiencing them – but personal – thinking with them and being able to do things with them. Therefore, even when I regard myself as a deliberative agent, I am concerned about my welfare in a way that I am not about the other agent’s welfare.
Brink attempted to elude this fact by suggesting a theory of welfare in which one, as a rational egoist, needed to promote one’s own welfare by promoting other agents’ welfare, insofar as everyone’s welfare is interdependent. The problem is that to conceive my own welfare requires me, to begin with, to conceive myself as a person from a first-person perspective that precludes me to see the interdependence between myself and others – understood from the point of view of the universe – as important for me as the interdependence between myself now and myself at other moments in time. It is in this sense that Rational Egoism is structurally incompatible with other-regarding Morality. It is in this sense, then, that Rational Egoism and other-regarding Morality seem to necessarily conflict.

Now, is this not another form of the Dualism of Practical Reason? Does not Brink, in his attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, fall in another profoundest problem, as unsolvable as the one that Sidgwick found? I suggest that all attempts to solve Sidgwick’s problem commit the same error.

IV. The oblivion of the rationalist’s problem

Brink claims that Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason only raises the question of the rational authority of morality. Brink suggests that, if the Dualism of Practical Reason would be understood differently, Sidgwick’s conclusion in The Methods of Ethics would undermine Practical Reason to an extent that Sidgwick would – and could – not have wanted: Practical Reason would be incoherent, and we would probably lose our trust in our moral reasoning. Indeed, I agree that Sidgwick would have probably wanted only to take amoral skepticism seriously, and he probably would not have wanted to give in to a possible violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics. However, it seems that Sidgwick was profoundly concerned because his analysis of the methods of ethics did
not yield the results that *he would have wanted*. This is why there is a Profoundest Problem of Ethics to begin with.

What is important to realize is that, again, it is Brink’s acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions that constrains Brink to deny the rationalist’s problem. When one holds a conflict-enhancing interpretation of the Dualism of Practical Reason, while at the same time assuming the biconditional relation between the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics and the possibility to trust Practical Reason, the only way to secure Practical Reason is to deny that Practical Reason is at stake to begin with. One needs to deny that the Dualism of Practical Reason expresses the conflict between two rational procedures and assume that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics express the conflict between rationality and morality. In other words, Brink’s interpretation of the conflict between Prudence and Benevolence is determined by Brink’s denial to accept that Practical Reason might be at stake. As I explain below, conflict-mitigating share the same burden. However, unlike Brink and Frankena, they do not need to deny that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics expresses the rationalist’s problem because, to begin with, they understand the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence as granting only deontic force of permission.

3.2. Conflict-mitigating Interpretations

3.2.1. Derek Parfit

3.2.1.1. Parfit’s Interpretation of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

Derek Parfit defends a conflict-mitigating interpretation of the Dualism of Practical Reason. Insofar as Parfit conceives morality from an internalist standpoint, Parfit claims that there is an internal connection between rationality and morality. In this sense, Parfit believes that the fact that an action is regarded as morally wrong gives us reasons to not act in such a way. However, insofar as persons have other types of reasons that may conflict with those that compel us to be moral, Parfit
suggests that it is not clear, on the one hand, that the conflict between these different kinds of – *commensurable* – reasons will be such that we will have a clear direction about what we ought to do, nor on the other hand, that we will always have most reasons to act in accordance with morality. As I have explained above, Parfit labels these two possibilities the rationalist’s and the moralist’s problem, respectively. Parfit understands the Profoundest Problem of Ethics in terms of these two, more particular problems. In Parfit’s view, then, what Sidgwick called the Profoundest Problem of Ethics could be solved if one is able to solve the rationalist’s *and* the moralist’s problem. I argue against this claim. I argue that, even if the rationalist’s and the moralist’s problem would be solved, the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism would still constitute *the* profoundest problem for ethics.

I. Conceptual Background

According to Parfit, reasons are based on facts that “count in favor of our having some attitude, or our acting in some way”. (Parfit 2011: 165) In this sense, Parfit says, when “we must choose between different possible acts, our reasons may conflict, and they can differ in what we can call their force, strength or weight”. (Parfit 2011: 32)

According to the weight of the conflicting reasons, reasons can be *decisive, strongly decisive, or sufficient*. This terminology is crucial.

Decisive reasons: A reason is a decisive reason when it is stronger than other reasons to act in another way, “and acting in this way is what we have most reason to do”. (Parfit 2011: 32)

Strongly decisive reasons: When a decisive reason is much stronger than a conflicting reason. (Parfit 2011: 32)
Sufficient reasons: When our reasons to act in some way are not weaker than the reasons to act in another way, but they are not decisive either. (Parfit 2011: 32)

When we have decisive reasons to act in some way, Parfit explains, “this act is what we should or ought to do in what we can call the decisive-reason-implying sense”. (Parfit 2011: 33) We would have, Parfit says, relevant, reason-giving facts to act in that way. (Parfit, 34) At the same time, some possible act is “rational if we have beliefs about the relevant facts whose truth would give us sufficient reasons to act in this way”. (Parfit 2011: 34) If we would perform that act, we would be acting rationally. (Parfit 2011: 35) However, an act would be irrational if we would have decisive reasons not to perform that act, and despite these decisive reasons, we acted in that way.

Keeping this in mind, according to Parfit, we “have self-interested reasons to care about our own well-being, and altruistic reasons to care about the well-being of other people”. (Parfit 2011: 40) In particular, we have two types of self-regarding reasons: personal reasons to care about ourselves and partial reasons to benefit the persons with whom we have close ties. (Parfit 2011: 136) These reasons correspond to what Sidgwick called Rational Egoism. We also have impartial reasons, which are reasons to care about everyone’s well-being, even if they are not related to us. (Parfit 2011: 136) These reasons correspond to what Sidgwick called Rational Benevolence.

II. Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason

Parfit recognizes, then, a Dualism of Practical Reason similar to that which Sidgwick recognized between the Principle of Egoism and the Principle of Utilitarianism. Here is what Parfit calls the Dualism of Practical Reason:
[We] always have most reason to do whatever would be impartially best, unless some other act would be best for ourselves. In such cases, we would have sufficient reasons to act in either way. If we knew the relevant facts, either act would be rational. (Parfit 2011: 131)

When they conflict, Parfit claims, and as we have explained, Sidgwick believes that reason would offer us no guidance. (Parfit 2011: 142) Parfit understands Sidgwick’s pessimism as Sidgwick claiming that impartial reasons and partial, or personal, reasons for acting are fully incommensurable. (Parfit 2011: 131-132) This is revealing. If one takes into consideration Phillips’ distinction between conflict-enhancing and conflict-mitigating interpretations, Parfit seems to suggest that Sidgwick himself defended a conflict-mitigating interpretation. Why? Because in case of conflict between what would be impartially best and what would be best for ourselves, Parfit suggests that we would have sufficient reasons – permission – to act in both ways, and not decisive reasons – requirement – to act in accordance with one type of reason in particular. In this sense, according to Parfit, Sidgwick could not resolve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, because he thought that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence were incommensurable, not because he thought that they were either first-order or second-order ultimate norms.

In particular, Parfit argues that Sidgwick’s thesis of incommensurability between impartial and self-regarding reasons rests upon three ideas: first, that different kinds of reasons cannot be compared; second, an appeal to the separateness of persons; and third, that Sidgwick believes that we can only have impartial reasons when we take a universal point of view, while we can only have personal or partial reasons when we take a personal point view. (Parfit 2011: 131, 133) From our personal first-person point of view, in which we usually live our lives, our self-regarding reasons are supreme; from the universal point of view – the point of view of the universe – insofar as we take the point of view of an external observer, impartial reasons are supreme. Why? Because as we are not affected by the separateness of persons, my well-being is not for me all-important, and
since the difference between others and myself is not fundamentally different, then we have reasons to care equally about the well-being of other people.

Parfit recreates what he believes is Sidgwick’s argument about the incommensurability of reasons in what Parfit labels the *Two Viewpoints Argument*:

(A) When we try to decide what we have most reason to do, we can rationally ask this question from our own personal point of view or from an imagined impartial point of view.

(B) When we ask this question from our personal point of view, the answer is that self-interested reasons are supreme.

(C) When we ask this question from our impartial point of view, the answer is that impartial reasons are supreme.

(D) To compare the strength of these two kinds of reason, we would need to have some third, neutral point of view.

(E) There is not such point of view.

Therefore:

Impartial and self-interested reasons are wholly incomparable. When such reasons conflict, no reason of either kind could be stronger than any reason of other kind.

Therefore:

In such cases, we would have sufficient reasons to do either what would be impartially best, or what would be best for ourselves. If we knew the facts, either act would be rational. (Parfit 2011: 134)
In Parfit’s reading of Sidgwick, Sidgwick considers that impartial and self-regarding reasons are “wholly incomparable”, inasmuch as the neutral point of view, which we would need to compare the personal point of view, from which personal or partial reasons are self-evident, and the point of view of the universe, from which impartial reasons are self-evident, does not exist. (Parfit 2011: 132) Nevertheless, Parfit claims that the Two Viewpoints Argument is not sound. Parfit claims that impartial and partial or personal reasons are “only very imprecisely comparable”, but comparable nevertheless. (Parfit 2011: 137) Thus, Sidgwick’s dualism is not as unsolvable as Sidgwick thought.

III. Parfit’s Objections to Sidgwick

In Parfit’s view, the Two Viewpoints Argument is exposed to three objections: an objection to premise (A); an objection to premise (B); and, an objection to premise (D). First, as to objection to premise (A), Parfit claims that we actually do not need an imagined universal point of view to be able to have impartial reasons. (Parfit 2011: 135) From our actual point of view, Parfit explains, we have impartial reasons to regard other’s well-being. (Parfit 2011: 137) Second, as to objection to premise (B), and by inference to the objection to premise (A), Parfit claims that partial and personal reasons are not always supreme from our personal point of view. According to Parfit, to affirm that from our personal point of view we only have self-regarding reasons leads us to counter-intuitive implications. For example, if we accept (B), if we were to choose between (a) saving the life of many people or (b) preventing oneself from a little cut, (b) would be the only rational option, but of course, Parfit claims: “This horrendous act would not be rational”. (Parfit 2011: 135) Finally, as an objection to premise (D), and by implication of the objection to premise (A) and (B) together, Parfit claims that we do not actually need a neutral point of view to compare impartial and partial or personal reasons. (Parfit 2011: 135) As we have both impartial and personal and
partial reasons from our actual point of view, we just need a neutral criterion to compare such reasons from such “actual, personal point of view”.\textsuperscript{59} (Parfit 2011: 135)

Impartial and self-regarding reasons are comparable. In Parfit’s view, the difficulty of comparing these reasons is only because “these reasons are provided by very different kinds of facts” (Parfit 2011: 138), not because each is considered supreme from different points of view. Parfit explains that these kinds of facts are two: person-neutral, which are facts that need not refer to us and, thus, provide impartial reasons for action; and person-relative, which are facts that must refer to us and, thus, provide self-interested reasons (Parfit, 138). Parfit claims, in a postulate resembling the separateness of persons, that I have a different relation to a fact when it affects me (person-relative) than when it doesn’t (person-neutral).\textsuperscript{60}

However, Parfit seems to suggest that, even though occasionally these different kinds of facts may give different force to personal and partial reasons than to impartial reasons, this does not imply that, once the degree of force that each type of fact gives to each type of reason is determined, these different types of reasons are not comparable. Quite the contrary. Parfit suggests that with a neutral criterion, which Parfit regards as reasons themselves, and in particular their comparable strength, impartial and self-regarding reasons are actually comparable. (Parfit 2011: 146, 148)

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\textsuperscript{59} In my view, Parfit’s objection to (A), (B), and (D) rest in Parfit’s reductionist account of personal identity. As I have suggested, Parfit considers that the agent can only have reasons for action at the time of acting. (Parfit 1987: 144) Insofar as the agent is only psychologically continuous with her future selves in terms of the psychological connectedness she has with those future selves, it is possible that the agent is more psychologically connected with other agents with whom she has close ties or agents that share her same nature. This would explain why Parfit believes that different points of view are not really needed.

\textsuperscript{60} Husain Sarkar has suggested that Parfit, with this step, may have injected subjectivism in his otherwise objective theory. (Sarkar 2018: 22-23) In section 3.2.1.3, I extend Sarkar’s argument, and I suggest that, with the difference between person-neutral and person-relative facts, Parfit ultimately relies on the two – incommensurable – points of view that his objection to Sidgwick’s Two Viewpoints Argument pretended to deny.
Parfit goes a step further. According to Parfit, not only is Sidgwick wrong in appealing to different points of view, but he is also wrong in thinking that if the Profoundest Problem of Ethics were to arise, it would be between impartial and self-regarding reasons. It rather arises between moral and non-moral reasons. (Parfit 2011: 147) In Parfit’s view, for instance, sometimes we act wrongly motivated by other-regarding reasons. When someone with whom we have close ties is in danger, we may act wrongly to save them, but the act would not, Parfit explains, be driven by self-regarding reasons. At the same time, Parfit continues, we might have impartial reasons to act wrongly. (Parfit 2011: 143) We might kill someone to save the lives of five people, an act which Parfit would regard as wrong.\footnote{I am taking here the suggestion of Husain Sarkar on how to understand Parfit in this passage (Sarkar 2018, 18, 26-28). Sarkar recruits this terminology from Parfit’s difference between a decisive-moral-reason sense and the morally-decisive-reason sense (Parfit 2011, 166-167; Sarkar 2018, 17-19).}

We can see here that Parfit conceives morality from an internalist standpoint. According to Parfit, if we regard a certain action as wrong, we have reasons to not perform that action.\footnote{Parfit claims: “For morality to matter, we must have reasons to care about morality, and to avoid acting wrongly.” (Parfit 2011: 148) Parfit also claims that when some act is wrong in the mustn’t-be-done sense, we have always decisive reasons to not perform such an act. (Parfit 2011: 173)} Another issue – the issue that concerns Parfit – is that it is in principle possible that we have other, equally strong, or maybe even stronger, reasons to act in a way that undermines morality.

IV. Parfit’s Dualism of Practical Reason

In Parfit’s view, the profoundest problem would arise only if, in case of a conflict between moral reasons and non-moral reasons, the neutral criterion, the strength of such reasons, would not give us guidance. We would have neither sufficient nor decisive reasons to act in either way. (Parfit 2011: 143) I believe Parfit deems this problem, which he labels as the rationalist’s problem, as equivalent to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. In Parfit’s view, another profound problem would arise if we would have sufficient reasons to act wrongly. (Parfit 2011: 147) Parfit names this the
moralist’s problem. (Parfit 2011: 148) Lazari-Radek and Singer do not, in my view, pay sufficient attention to this difference, and they claim that Parfit solves Sidgwick’s problem with a view that Parfit claims to take from Sidgwick, namely, a wide value-based objective view: (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 161-163)

When one of our two possible acts would make things go in some way that would be impartially better, but the other act would make things go better either for ourselves or those to whom we have close ties, we often have sufficient reasons to act in either way. (Parfit 2011: 137)

However, as I have explained, Parfit’s rationalist’s and moralist’s problems do not appeal to impartial and partial reasons or personal reasons (as the wide value-based objective view does). There is actually another theory to which Parfit explicitly appeals in his section “The Profoundest Problem”. (Parfit 2011: 141, 142) Parfit says in what he calls the Dualism of Duty and Self-Interest:

If duty and self-interest never [practically] conflict, we would always have most reason both to do our duty and to do what would be best for ourselves. But if we had to choose between two acts, of which one was our duty but the other would be better for ourselves, reason would give us no guidance. In such cases, we would not have stronger reasons to act in either of these ways. If we knew the relevant facts, either act would be rational. (Parfit 2011: 142)

3.2.1.2. Parfit’s Solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

I claim Parfit’s answer to the rationalist’s problem needs to be understood as something in between a wide value-based objective view and the Dualism of Duty and Self-Interest. Parfit has claimed that not all self-regarding reasons are non-moral, and Parfit associates Duty with moral reasons.⁶³ If this is so, we can state a Parfitian-like theory:

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⁶³ Parfit understands Duty as what “we ought morally to do, when it would be wrong for us to not act in this way.” In parallel, wrong would be understood as the opposite of what we ought morally to do. (Parfit 2011, 165)
Dualism of moral and non-moral reasons: If moral and non-moral reasons never practically conflict, we would always have decisive reasons to act according to both moral and non-moral reasons. But if we had to choose between two acts, for one of which we had moral-reasons counting in its favor, and for the other we had non-moral reasons counting in its favor, we would have sufficient reasons to act in either way.

With the Dualism of moral and non-moral reasons, the rationalist’s problem is solved: we always have at least sufficient reasons to act in some way. What about the moralist problem? The moralist’s problem is not yet solved; it is still possible that we might have sufficient reasons to act wrongly. I believe, though, that Parfit does think that he is able to solve the moralist’s problem. Parfit claims: “Morality might have supreme importance in the reason-implying sense, since we might have always decisive reasons to do our duty, and to avoid acting wrongly”. (Parfit 2011: 149) Just after this, Parfit claims: “In the rest of this volume, I shall mostly discuss morality”. (Parfit 2011: 149) If one assumes that the rationalist’s problem is solved with a Dualism of moral and non-moral reasons, one might claim that Parfit, in “the rest of the volume,” in which he “mostly” discusses “morality,” is attempting to solve the moralist problem. This is an unsubstantiated claim, but it might be an interesting thought to pursue on another occasion.

3.2.1.3. Objections to Derek Parfit

I. Two Viewpoints Assumption

Parfit’s conflict-mitigating interpretation relies on the assumption that moral and non-moral reasons are commensurable. According to Parfit, moral and non-moral reasons are ultimately either personal, partial, or impersonal reasons – without assuming that there is a correspondence between non-moral and personal or partial reasons and between moral and impartial reasons. At the same time, Parfit suggests that personal, partial, and impersonal reasons are commensurable insofar as they are based on facts that, these, are commensurable. In particular, Parfit distinguishes between
person-relative and person-neutral facts, suggesting that an agent has a relation with person-relative facts that she does not necessarily have with person-neutral facts and that this different relation might affect the way these different facts transmit weight to their respective types of reasons. One can ask here how the weight of these reasons ought to be assigned.

Husain Sarkar has actually suggested an objection against Parfit in just these terms. (Sarkar 2018: 22-23) As Sarkar suggests, Parfit seems to have two options. On the one hand, (a) Parfit can concede that the agent has some power in determining the weight of certain types of reason – personal or partial reasons – such as that she gives a special weight to the well-being of certain persons. In my view, this would account for Parfit’s so called person-relative facts; with which the agent seems to have some special relation. However, as Sarkar suggests: “if, ultimately, what weight to assign is dependent on the moral agent, then it injects a significant element of subjectivism, à la Korsgaard, into Parfit’s moral theory that is quite foreign to it.” (Sarkar 2018: 23) On the other hand, (b) Sarkar suggests that the other option seems to be to determine the weight of all reasons objectively by only appealing to facts that are regarded impartially, independently of the moral agent. In my view, this would account for Parfit’s person-neutral facts. And, according to Sarkar, this would suit happily with Parfit’s intention to provide an objective moral theory.

Sarkar does not suggest if Parfit ought to choose specifically between (a) and (b); he does suggest, however, that Parfit needs to make a choice if he wants to explain precisely how the weight of reasons – which supposedly determines how the conflict between them needs to be resolved – is assigned. I want to go a step further. In my view, if Parfit wants to provide a plausible – and somewhat Sidgwickian – theory of rationality, Parfit needs to accept that there are different types of reasons – personal, partial, and impartial – and different types of facts – person-relative and person-neutral. However, as Sarkar suggests with his objection, Parfit can only recognize these different types of reasons and different types of facts if the agent in his theory of rationality, at the
same time, holds two different points of view that, not surprisingly, correspond with the two –
incommensurable – points of view that generated Sidgwick’s Profoundest Problem of Ethics in
the first place.

In this sense, I suggest that what Sarkar calls a subjectivist injection in Parfit’s objective
theory is, truly, Parfit’s appeal to a first-person perspective in order to explain the special weight
that person-relative facts give to personal and partial reasons. Without appealing to this first-person
point of view and determining the weight of all reasons only from an impartial point of view –
Sidgwick would say the point of view of the universe –, all reasons would be impartial. Similarly,
without appealing to the impartial point of view, all reasons would be personal or partial. Parfit,
therefore, needs to appeal to two different points of view from which the weight assigned to rea-
sons would very likely be quite different. If my suggestion is right, then, Parfit might unknowingly
be falling into another Sidgwickian Dualism of Practical Reason between self-regarding and other-
regarding reasons. In fact, once the agent needs to appeal to two different points of view that con-
ceive the facts differently, it seems that the agent would be left with conflicting intuitions about
how to conceive these; and, ultimately, she would be left without being able to determine what she
ought to do. This dualism would not necessarily mirror a conflict between moral and non-moral
reasons. However, once the conflict between personal, and impartial reasons occurs, it is conceiv-
able that the dualism of moral and non-moral reasons would be difficult, if not impossible, to solve.

II.  The disappearance of reasons

From the previous objection, another objection against Parfit – also suggested by Sarkar, but that
I have extended – follows. As Sarkar claims:

The “only way to factor [the agent, and her point of view] out of the picture … is
to assume that reasons are commensurate and that there are agent-independent, ob-
jective, normative facts that will provide the “normative force” … or “a truly normative reason” … for what [the agent] must do. But, then, one might say, why not just suppose that? (Sarkar 2018: 14)

Sarkar’s objection is pungent. It is not clear why Parfit appeals to Sidgwick’s dualism in the first place if he ultimately relies on objective facts – that can be explained impartially – to determine the weight of certain conflicting reasons. However, as I have suggested in the objection above, it does appear that Parfit needs to appeal to different points of view to explain the difference between the agent’s agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons.

Now, if Parfit gives in to the possibility that we might need different points of view – that at least seem incommensurable – to explain the different weights that the agent’s reasons get from person-relative and person-neutral facts, it is not clear then on what grounds Parfit seems to assume that, when two different – only very imprecisely comparable – reasons conflict, we need to assume that the reasons that are not decisive will simply vaporize. (Sarkar 2018: 14) At best, if they are indeed somewhat comparable, and even if I would have most reason to act in a certain way, the other type of reason would not vanish precisely because I would still have that reason from the other point of view.

In this sense, even if I actually would know what I have most reasons to do, this would not avoid that my Practical Reason would be pitted against itself. I understand this is a strange claim. But I believe it actually sheds light onto the very nature of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. The problem is not about being able to rely on Practical Reason, or about Morality possibly being undermined. The problem, in my view, is about an inescapable duality of standpoints to which, as human beings that live in the first-person perspective but that are able to think impartially – from the point of view of the universe –, are condemned. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics, then, might suggest that the sources of normativity are divided and pitted against themselves.
III. The problem with conflict-mitigating interpretations

Conflict-mitigating interpretations, I have suggested, only solve a watered-down version of what Sidgwick called the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. With Parfit’s solution, we can now understand why. Conflict-mitigating interpretations, while accepting – or maybe precisely because they accept – Sidgwick’s Underlying Presupposition and the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics, they understand the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence in a way that their conflict is already unproblematic. In other words, they try to understand these conflicting principles in a way in which they already do not practically nor theoretically conflict.64 Why? I can only suggest here a conjecture: it might be because they do not give in to the possibility, as Sidgwick did, that we might not be able to trust Practical Reason in determining what we ought to do. If one accepts Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, but at the same time assumes the reliability of Practical Reason, one has only so many options to guarantee that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is not violated.

In my view, Parfit’s own understanding of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason gives away Parfit’s denial to take seriously the Profoundest Problem of Ethics: to suggest that Sidgwick considered that the conflict between Egoism and Utilitarianism was only between two theories granting rational permission is to not be able to perceive the tone of alarm penetrating The Methods of Ethics, nor – most importantly – being able to recognize Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. In fact, Parfit’s Two Viewpoints Argument, which allegedly outlines the reasoning that lead Sidgwick to find the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, only outlines Sidgwick’s claim that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence theoretically conflict – that is, clause (6) in what I call Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument.

64 Sarkar himself explains that, as Parfit defines it, the rationalist’s problem “is relatively simple, if not almost trivial, compared to the moralist’s problem.” (Sarkar 2018: 25) This claim is not accidental. Once one understands the conflict between the Principles of Egoism and Utilitarianism from a conflict-mitigating view, the only deep problem is to safeguard morality.
It is not arbitrary, then, that Parfit objects to Sidgwick’s thesis of incommensurability in the Two Viewpoint Argument. As I have explained, conflict-mitigating views, to “solve” the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, only need to show that the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence do not theoretically conflict. If we remember the definition provided above of theoretical conflict, Prudence and Benevolence theoretically conflict if and only if they are either mutually inconsistent, or incommensurable.

The question is: why is this really important? Because the conflict between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence, when understood in their full force, from their respective points of view, reveals a problem even deeper than the one Sidgwick conceived, a problem that goes beyond the possibility to trust or not our Practical Reason, or the rational authority of morality. It instead speaks about the nature of our Practical Reason. I suggest that Sidgwick noticed this problem but constrained by his unquestioned acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, he did not perceive the deepness of the problem that he had found. Conflict-mitigating interpretations make a huger error. Constrained by their acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, and by their denial to question Practical Reason, they have forgotten the profoundness of the conflict between self-regard and Duty; and they have turned the conflict into a rational game in which one simply needs to justify the weight given to each principle.

3.2.2. Owen McLeod

3.2.2.1. McLeod’s Interpretation of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

Owen McLeod defends an internalist enhanced conflict-mitigating view of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason. However, McLeod claims that his view is not conflict-mitigating. As I try to explain, McLeod is not really against conflict-mitigating views but against standard conflict-mitigating views. Ultimately, McLeod argues that, with his view, the conflict between Egoism and
Utilitarianism does not constitute a Dualism of Practical Reason – insofar as, McLeod claims, Practical Reason does not dictate two sets of inconsistent principles.

I. Sidgwick’s problem

McLeod, following Jerome Schneewind’s interpretation of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason, understands the Profoundest Problem of Ethics as a problem “of being stuck with a logically inconsistent set of propositions”.65 (McLeod 2000: 284) In particular, according to McLeod, Sidgwick is attracted to the following set of propositions:

\[
\begin{align*}
U & : \text{An act is morally right iff it maximizes utility.} \\
E & : \text{An act is prudentially right iff it maximizes agent-utility.} \\
P1 & : \text{An act is reasonable iff it is morally right or prudentially right; an act is not reasonable iff it is morally wrong or prudentially wrong.} \\
P2 & : \text{It is possible for an act that maximizes utility to fail to maximize agent-utility, and vice versa. (McLeod 2000: 284)}
\end{align*}
\]

McLeod claims that Sidgwick’s problem is that he cannot accept all four propositions at the same time insofar as they form an inconsistent set: if one accepts P2, and indeed an act that maximizes utility fails to maximize agent-utility, then, in accordance with U and E, this act is morally right but prudentially wrong. But now, in accordance with P1, this act is reasonable and not reasonable at the same time. This is what Sidgwick called, according to McLeod, the Dualism of Practical Reason.

65 For the interpretation of Schneewind, see Sidgwick’s Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy. In particular, Part II.
II. McLeod’s objection against standard conflict-mitigating views

Conflict-mitigating views, claims McLeod, are not able to solve Sidgwick’s problem as he understands it. McLeod suggests that conflict-mitigating views can be stated in the following principle:

\[(IW) \text{ An act is rationally permissible iff it is morally required or prudentially required.} \text{ (McLeod 200: 285)}\]

Conflict-mitigating interpretations, then, according to McLeod, understand the notion reasonable in P1 as rational permissibility – assuming that Reason is indeterminate –, such that P2 does not make the set of propositions inconsistent. According to McLeod, though, Sidgwick should not accept, with conflict-mitigating interpretations, that Reason is indeterminate.\(^6\) (McLeod 2000: 286) McLeod gives to two reasons to support his claim. First, (IW) generates implausible results, as it only declares an act as rationally permissible if and only if it is rationally required either morally or prudentially. But, McLeod wonders: what if, when deciding between two acts, both are only morally and prudentially permitted? According to (IW), such acts would not be rationally permissible, since neither option is morally or prudentially required. (McLeod 2000: 287) This, McLeod claims, is absurd.

And McLeod might be right. However, I believe it is not difficult to amend all conflict-mitigating views by including an additional clause that dictates that, when deciding between two alternatives, both morally and prudentially permitted, at least one act – or more plausibly both – are rationally permissible. (McLeod 2000: 287)

\(^6\) In particular, McLeod objects to what Phillips calls the Indeterminacy View in “Sidgwick, Dualism and Indeterminacy in Practical Reason”, which later labels, in Sidgwickian Ethics, as conflict-mitigating interpretations.
However, this would lead us to McLeod’s second objection against conflict-mitigating interpretations. Second, McLeod claims that (IW)’s “implication that conflicts of moral and prudential obligation will always or necessarily resolve themselves into rational ties is implausible”. (McLeod 2000: 287) According to McLeod, two options being morally and prudentially permitted does not necessarily entail that both options are equally rationally permissible. According to McLeod, Sidgwick’s problem needs to be solved in a way that the set of propositions to which Sidgwick is attracted is not inconsistent and one can, at the same, have still more reasons to act in a certain way.

III. McLeod’s enhanced conflict-mitigating interpretation

This second objection is, in my view, very revealing; while McLeod believes he is objecting to conflict-mitigating interpretation, he is only at best objecting to standard conflict-mitigating views – which in fact Phillips already considers less plausible than enhanced conflict-mitigating views. (Phillips 1998: 60) Enhanced conflict-mitigating views are not vulnerable to McLeod’s second objection. Why? Because, as I have explained, they precisely indicate that when two principles that grant only rational permission conflict, one is permitted to give more strength to one of the principles. The question, then, is how one assigns weight to each principle such that their conflict does not always result in a rational tie. I have explained that Parfit believes that the weight of reasons is based on the force of certain facts. McLeod appeals to a similar – although vaguer – criterion. McLeod claims:

Normative weight of acts: Normative weight is a property of acts. Acts inherit this weight in virtue of their normative status. (McLeod 2000: 287)
McLeod does not explain the relation between the normative status of an act and the weight that the act has. He just assumes that the fact that an act is morally or prudentially right gives that act certain normative weight. McLeod admits that it might be epistemologically complex to assign each act its specific weight; but he nevertheless assumes that these weights of all reasonable acts are commensurable.\textsuperscript{67} (McLeod 2000: 288)

### 3.2.2.2. McLeod’s Solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

To understand McLeod’s solution, it is necessary to introduce some of his terminology:

- **Morally right acts:** An act is morally right iff it maximizes utility. (McLeod 2000: 288)

- **Prudentially right acts:** An act is prudentially right iff it maximizes agent-utility. (McLeod 2000: 288)

- **Prima facie reasonable act:** An “act is prima facie reasonable if and only if it is morally or prudentially right”. (McLeod 2000: 287)

- **All-reasonable acts:** An “act is all-reasonable if and only if it is prima facie reasonable, and no alternative has more normative weight than it”. (McLeod 2000: 288)

\textsuperscript{67} McLeod admits that the “central (and controversial) assumption here, of course, is that normative weights are commensurable.” (McLeod 2000: 288) However, McLeod does not justify this claim.
Uniquely all-in reasonable acts: An “act is uniquely all-in reasonable if and only if it is prima facie reasonable, and it is the most normatively weighty alternative”. (McLeod 2000: 288)

The key of McLeod’s alternative interpretation is the substitution of Sidgwick’s notion of reasonable act for prima facie reasonable act. With this substitution, McLeod accepts the following set of propositions:

U: An act is morally right iff it maximizes utility.

E: An act is prudentially right iff it maximizes agent-utility.

P1*: And act is prima facie reasonable iff it is morally right or prudentially right; and act is not prima facie reasonable iff it is morally wrong or prudentially wrong.

P2: It is possible for an act that maximizes utility to fail to maximize agent-utility, and vice versa. (McLeod 2000: 288)

This set of propositions is not inconsistent. One can accept – P2 – that there might be an act that maximize agent-utility and not utility; that consequently – because U and E – this act is prudentially right and morally wrong and still be able to claim that P1* is true. In this case, to accept P1* would entail that this act is prima facie reasonable and prima facie not reasonable. In such cases, the normative weight of the act will either determine the act as uniquely all-in reasonable – being required to perform that act – or it will determine that act as all-reasonable – being permitted to perform this act. According to McLeod, the problem would be if two acts would be, at the same time, uniquely all-in reasonable and uniquely all-in not reasonable. (McLeod 2000: 288) However, by definition, this is not possible.

But this is not a contradiction as, apparently, holding that an act is reasonable and not reasonable at the same time is.
There can only be one act that it is most weighty. If there would be two, no alternative would have more normative weight than the other, and these acts both be considered, by definition, all-reasonable acts. With his interpretation, then, McLeod believes that not only is Ethics safe from Sidgwick’s profoundest problem, but also that Practical Reason does not fall into a dualism.

3.2.2.3. Objections to Owen McLeod

As I have suggested, I do not want to repeat the objections that I have already presented to conflict-mitigating interpretations when objecting Parfit’s view. Again, it is clear to me that McLeod is not able to perceive the deepness of the problem that Sidgwick found, and he only solves a watered-down version of the problem. I do believe that McLeod, as well as Parfit, offer a satisfactory solution to their problem. But this does not entail that they are solving the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. As I have suggested, Parfit’s and McLeod’s assumption that the normative force of acts is commensurable seems to be the problem.

As well as their unquestioned acceptance of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. It is crucial here to notice that McLeod seems to almost explicitly accept a form of Sidgwick’s Fundamental Postulate of Ethics. Only in this way, I believe, one can understand McLeod’s claim that the set of propositions to which Sidgwick was attracted \{U, E, P1, PE\} is inconsistent. McLeod justified his claim, suggesting that accepting the set entails that one act can be reasonable and not reasonable at the same time. And this seems to be sufficient reason for him to provide another – conflict-mitigating – notion of reasonableness in which a modified set of propositions would not be no longer inconsistent. McLeod’s approach, then, is to avoid the problem that Sidgwick found and define rationality in a way in which the conflict between prudence and morality is not problematic to begin with. But the question is: why should it be problematic that one act is prudentially
reasonable and morally reasonable at the same time? Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions seems to be, again, lurking in the background.

3.2.3. David Phillips

3.2.3.1. Phillip’s Interpretation of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

David Phillips defends an enhanced conflict-mitigating interpretation of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason. He is also an internalist. I do not present any particular objection to Phillips. However, as I have already indicated, insofar as Phillips defends a conflict-mitigating view, the objections presented against Parfit and McLeod are applicable to Phillips’ position.

I. Phillips’ enhanced conflict-mitigating view

Enhanced conflict-mitigating interpretations of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason differ from standard conflict-mitigating interpretations in the way they assign weight to the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence. While standard conflict-mitigating interpretations claim that, when these principles conflict, it is – equally – rationally permissible to act in accordance with Egoism and Utilitarianism; enhanced conflict-mitigating interpretations claim that, if it is already rationally permissible to act in accordance with either of both theories, it must also be rationally permissible to give “some extra weight to one’s own interest but otherwise considering everyone’s interests equally”; or vice versa. (Phillips 1998: 60; my emphasis) Enhanced conflict-mitigating views, then, give different normative force to the dictates of Utilitarianism and Egoism. When

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69 As I have suggested, The Indeterminacy View is another name to express what we have explained as a conflict-mitigating view. In “Sidgwick, Dualism and Indeterminacy in Practical Reason” Phillips uses the notion of The Indeterminacy View, and in Sidgwickian Ethics Phillips uses the notion conflicting-mitigating view. Phillips explains that the Indeterminacy View is inspired by Parfit’s interpretation of Sidgwick’s dualism. (Phillips 1998: 75) The enhanced conflict-mitigating view is a term that I use to refer to Phillips’ enhanced conflict-mitigating view.
their dictates do not conflict, one is permitted to act in accordance with either principle. When they conflict, the different weight already assigned to the principles will determine the principle in accordance with which we ought to act.

3.2.3.2. Phillip’s Interpretation of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

Phillips, drawing from Parfit, defends a form of the enhanced conflict-mitigating view, which he labels as *The Qualified Permissive View*. (Phillips 2011: 148) According to such a view:

(i) It is *not* rationally permissible to ignore the well-being of others when choosing between two options exactly equally as good for oneself. (Phillips 2011: 148)

(ii) It is not permissible to choose an option trivially better for you that is seriously worse for others. (Phillips 2011: 148)

(iii) In cases “of choices between options that are equally good or roughly equally good for everyone, but much better or worse for the agent” one is “rationally required” to choose the option that is much better for him or avoid the option that is much worse for him. (Phillips 2011: 148, 150)

As we can see, Phillips’ Qualified Permissive View permits all acts that do not conflict with (i) and (ii) but rationally requires (iii). In this sense, Phillips claims:

On the view I advocate, and I take it on the views advocated both by Parfit and Crisp, *(a)* it would be rational to choose to save my own life even at the cost of 100 strangers’ lives, and *(b)* it would be rationally permissible to sacrifice my own life to save the lives of two strangers. (Phillips 2011: 150)
In Phillips’ view, \((a)\) and \((b)\) do not conflict with \((i)\), \((ii)\), or \((iii)\). It is not much worse, at least in Phillips’ view, to lose my life against two strangers losing theirs. I am not rationally required, then, to choose to save my own life. At the same time, as losing my life is not trivially better for me, I would also be permitted to choose my own life over 100 strangers’ lives.

3.2.3.3. Objection to David Phillips

I. An injection of subjectivism

I borrow here again Sarkar’s remark against the way Parfit seemed to assign weight to reasons. As I have argued, extending Sarkar’s objection, Parfit seems to need two different – incommensurable – points of view to give different normative force to different types of reasons. A similar claim could be made here against Phillips. In particular, it is not clear how Phillips’ can assign different weights to the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence without appealing to different – we may say – normative sources. But, if Philips would do so, as I have indicated with Parfit and McLeod, Phillips would be falling into a similar dualism as the one that made Sidgwick claim that Ethics was afflicted by a profoundest problem.

II. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics persists

I am not offering here new particular objections to David Phillips that I have not offered yet against Parfit or McLeod. My only intention here is to restate these objections in different forms to allow them to sink in; and to illustrate, we may say, all the faces of the same prism. I want to suggest here, briefly, that with Phillips’ conflict-mitigating interpretation a profound solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is not really offered. Let us appeal to Airport Dilemma. In particular, it is not clear that Phillips’ Qualified Permissive View would resolve the conflict between, on the one hand, your reasons to get the job of your dreams and, on the other hand, your reasons to save
the life of the stranger. In Phillips’ view, considering the example that he suggests, it would be both rationally permissible to give the last spot in the plane to the stranger as well as it would be rationally permissible to take that spot for yourself. Insofar as, supposedly, the life of a person is more valuable than a job offer – even if it is your dream job –, it is conceivable to think that prudential reasons have some more weight than benevolent reasons.

However, two questions still need to be answered. First: How are these weights assigned? If one can assign to one’s well-being more weight than to the other’s well-being, how ought one to do so? Again, it seems that Phillips finds himself with a similar problem to Parfit and McLeod. An old dualism seems to be in the background of one’s possibility to assign different importance to one’s well-being than to the other’s well-being. But, if that dualism cannot be avoided, it is not clear that the conflict between prudential and benevolent reasons that one would have in Airport Dilemma would be resolved.

3.2.4. Roger Crisp

3.2.4.1. Crisp’s Interpretation of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

Roger Crisp also defends an enhanced conflict-mitigating interpretation of Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason, only differing from those of Phillips or McLeod in the way Crisp assigns particular weights to the Principles of Prudence and Benevolence. However, pace Parfit, Phillips, and McLeod, and like Brink and Frankena, Crisp conceives morality from an externalist standpoint.

I. Crisp’s Externalism

Crisp is not an externalist like Frankena and Brink. On the one hand, Frankena and Brink are externalists insofar as they simply deny the internal connection between rationality and morality. As I have explained, they appealed to their externalism to understand the conflict between Rational
Egoism and Utilitarianism as a conflict between rationality and morality and to understand the Profoundest Problem as if the rational authority of morality was at stake. On the other hand, Crisp is an externalist insofar as he claims that one can understand the conflict expressed in the Dualism of Practical Reason without the necessity to appeal to moral terminology, nor “moral properties as reason-giving in themselves” (Crisp 2006: 17; also 16, 61, 126).

II. Crisp’s Dualism of Practical Reason

In fact, Crisp suggests that Sidgwick’s dualism can be better approached when one dismisses morality as an aspect to be considered in the conflict between Prudence and Benevolence; and regards the Profoundest Problem of Ethics as a conflict between two rational principles: one principle that promotes self-regard and another principle that promotes regard for others, both being rationally self-evident. (Crisp 2006: 126, 131-135). According to Crisp, then, the Dualism of Practical Reason is a dualism between reasons of two different but commensurable kinds: self-regarding reasons to care about one’s own well-being and other-regarding reasons to care about the well-being of others. (Crisp 2006: 136-139)

3.2.4.2. Crisp’s Solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

The solution of Crisp’s profoundest problem is arrived at by simply deciding how to weigh and compare these two different kinds of reasons. After many attempts to decide how two weight one’s own well-being in relation to the well-being of others, Crisp concludes, as a solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, in what he calls his Sufficiency Theory. The Sufficiency Theory, by means of what Crisp calls the Sufficiency Principle, states: “Special concern for any being B is appropriate up to the point at which B has a level of well-being such that B can live a life which is sufficiently good.” (Crisp 2006: 160)
Now, Crisp assumes as a ‘bedrock principle’ that one has normative reasons to promote one’s own well-being. (Crisp 2006: 56-61) With his Sufficiency theory, Crisp suggests, then, that other things equal, one is rationally required to promote one’s own well-being. However, if a being B does not live a life that can be regarded as sufficiently good, one is rationally required to help such a being B. If helping that being conflicts with promoting one’s well-being, one is rationally permitted to act in both ways. I will not present any particular objections against Crisp’s solution. The objections presented above against Parfit, McLeod and Phillips can be also raised to Crisp.

3.2.5. Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek & Peter Singer
3.2.5.1. Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s Interpretation of the Profoundest Problem

Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer believe that what is profoundly problematic in what Sidgwick called the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is the risk that what Parfit called the moralist’s problem may not be able to be solved. Considering what is at stake with the Profoundest Problem of Ethics – the possibility to trust our Practical Reason – when one understands it from a conflict-enhancing interpretation, I suggest that Lazari-Radek and Singer, in claiming that the moralist’s problem is the profoundest problem of ethics, implicitly support a conflict-mitigating interpretation. Still, their approach to solve their Profoundest Problem of Ethics is different than those of Parfit, McLeod, Phillips, or Crisp. Lazari-Radek and Singer attempt to dissolve the Dualism of Practical Reason by suggesting a distinction between normative and motivating reasons; and indicating that only moral reasons are normative. I argue that, under scrutiny, Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s argument does not hold.

I. Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s objection against any Dualism of Practical Reason
Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer believe that any dualism of practical reason undermines morality. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 163) Why? Because at worst – when understanding the Dualism of Practical Reason from a conflict-enhancing interpretation –, Sidgwick’s dualism will entail a contradiction within Practical Reason; that is: Practical Reason would be incoherent, and any of its dictates – morality included – would be undermined. On the other hand, at best – when understanding the Dualism of Practical Reason from a conflict-mitigating view –, it will entail that Reason is indeterminate and we would have at best only rational permission to act as morality requires. (Lazari-Radek 2011: 163) That is: at best, we will only have sufficient reasons to act morally, and moral reasons have only deontic force of permission. (Phillips 2011: 115; Parfit 2011: 137)

In Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s view, then, even conceiving the Dualism of Practical Reason from a conflict-mitigating view, the[ir] Profoundest Problem of Ethics cannot be fully solved: in case of conflict between prudence and benevolence, we may never be required to act as morality requires. They claim:

Parfit’s wide value-based objective view, which can allow that we often have decisive reasons to do what morality requires, is less damaging to the importance of morality than Sidgwick’s ‘wholly incomparable reasons’ view. Nevertheless, if we want morality to be truly important, we need to be able to do better in overcoming the dualism. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 163)

Considering that Lazari-Radek and Singer claim that any dualism damages the importance of morality, it is not surprising that they attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics by dissolving the Dualism of Practical Reason. In this sense, although they depart from a similar position than Parfit’s, they attempt to disregard all non-moral reasons as not reliable.

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70 Notice that this objection can be directed against Parfit, Phillip, Crisp, and McLeod.
3.2.5.2. Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s Solution to the Profoundest Problem

In particular, Lazari-Radek and Singer attempt to cast doubt on the origins of non-moral reasons. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 174) Lazari-Radek and Singer appeal to Sidgwick’s idea, in *The Methods of Ethics*, that it “may (…) be possible to prove that some ethical beliefs have been caused in such a way as to make it probable that they are wholly or partially erroneous”. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 176) Although Sidgwick does not believe that the validity of Ethical intuitions can be discarded *en block* by providing a genealogy of their physical causes, Sidgwick does believe that one can cast doubt on an ethical belief if it is shown that the causes that produce it tend to produce false beliefs. (211-213)

Lazari-Radek and Singer suggest that, with the current literature on the origins of morality and of our moral intuitions, not available at Sidgwick’s time, it is possible to claim that some kinds of ethical beliefs, beliefs derived from the *rationality of Egoism*, may be invalid, as it can be shown that the psychological process that causes them tends to cause false beliefs. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 179) In particular, Lazari-Radek and Singer regard three “elements in the process of establishing that an intuition has the highest possible degree of reliability”: (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 195)

1. Careful reflection leading to a conviction of self-evidence.
2. Independent agreement of other careful thinkers.
3. Absence of a plausible explanation of the intuition as a non-truth-tracking psychological process.

While they understand that failing to comply only with the third requirement cannot demonstrate that an intuition is false, but it can only cast doubt on its reliability, they nevertheless assume that “if an intuition that met the first two requirements but not the third were to clash with
an intuition that met all three, we would have ground for preferring the intuition for which there was no evolutionary explanation”.71 (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 195) In this sense, Lazari-Radek and Singer claim that, while there is not nowadays a plausible evolutionary view to explain, in Parfit’s terminology, moral reasons, there are instead some plausible explanations of non-moral reasons being caused by non-truth-tracking psychological processes. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 179-194)

In particular, Lazari-Radek and Singer suggest that while there are evolutionary explanations that explain the evolutionary advantage that the rationality of Egoism brought about, these explanations actually cast a doubt on the reliability of such psychological processes. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 183) In other words, the fact that a psychological process was evolutionary advantageous at a certain time does not mean that it is advantageous now and that we still have reasons to act according to such beliefs. In this sense, Lazari-Radek and Singer reject what Parfit called personal and partial reasons, when non-moral reasons, as only motivating reasons, but not actually normative reasons. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 198) In their view, only moral – impartial – reasons can be counted as normative, and thus when impartial reasons and partial or personal reasons conflict, impartial reasons are decisive reasons for action.

3.2.5.3. Objections to Katarzyna Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer

I. The Transparency Objection

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71 Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s The Point of View of the Universe was first published in 2014. The year their book was published is relevant because their claim – that there are not “today” plausible evolutionary explanations for moral reasons – seems to be contradicted by many authors that suggested, before 2014, that there might be, pace Lazari-Radek and Singer, plausible evolutionary explanations for moral reasons. I explain this in more detail in the objections against Lazari-Radek and Singer.
Christine Korsgaard, in *The Sources of Normativity*, defines three conditions that a theory needs to provide an answer to what she labels as the *normative question*. (Korsgaard 2014: 16-17) Korsgaard defines the normative question as the question that the agent might ask when one tells her that she ought to do something; that is: why ought I to do what morality required me? (Korsgaard 2014: 13) Korsgaard suggests that the answer to the normative question needs to give a justificatory explanation to the morally skeptic question about what one ought to do what morality requires. As I have just said, Korsgaard claims that the answer to the normative question needs to comply with three conditions: *(i)* it needs to appeal to the first-person perspective of the agent; *(ii)* it needs to be transparent; and *(iii)* it needs to appeal to our sense of identity. I believe condition *(ii)* undermines Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s attempt to solve the [ir] Profoundest Problem of Ethics.

Korsgaard claims, regarding the transparency condition:

> If a theory’s explanation of how morality motivates us essentially depends on the fact that the source or nature of our motives is concealed from us, or that we often act blindly or from habit, then it lacks transparency. … A normative moral theory must be one that allows us to act in the full light of knowledge of what morality is and why we are susceptible to its influences, and at the same time to believe that our actions are justified and make sense. (Korsgaard 2014: 17)

Keeping the transparency condition in mind, I suggest that Lazari-Radek and Singer, precisely in trying to undermine non-moral reasons by indicating that there is a plausible explanation that traces their origins in non-truth-tracking psychological processes, Lazari-Radek and Singer actually compromise morality itself. Why? Because Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s “defense” to morality is merely that, at least for now, there is not yet a plausible explanation indicating that the origin of moral reasons rests in a non-truth-tracking psychological process. In this sense, in their attempt to defend morality, Lazari-Radek and Singer sacrifice the transparency of the – alleged –
unique normative reasons. In this sense, once they have cast doubt on non-moral reasons, moral reasons risk being undermined in just the same way.

II. An evolutionary explanation of moral reasons

In fact, even when Henry Sidgwick was writing *The Methods of Ethics*, another author, Peter Kropotkin, was writing two treatises – *Mutual Aid* and *Ethics: Origins and Development*, in which he claimed, allegedly following Charles Darwin, that an inherent moral instinct, mutual aid, is not only a predominant fact of nature, but it is a predominant factor in the evolution of human beings. (Kropotkin 2005: 5, 61) Moreover, Kropotkin claims that one can trace the development of this instinct in, first, moral *feelings* of sympathy and, then, the *idea* of justice and equity – among all individual human beings – that grounds the conception of morality that we – or at least so claims Kropotkin – have today. (Kropotkin 1934: 14-15)

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Kropotkin’s claims had, at that time, any validity. However, I do believe that Kropotkin suggests an interesting idea that might undermine the origin of morality – at least as Lazari-Radek and Singer conceive it. Kropotkin claims: “in the animal world we see how the personal will of individuals blends with the common will”. (Kropotkin 1934: 65) In fact, suggests Kropotkin, many examples in the animal kingdom illustrate that “the co-ordination of the individual will with the will and the purpose of the whole”.72 (Kropotkin 1934: 65) If this is so, Kropotkin continues, the instincts of self-preservation of the individual – and the origins of the rationality of Egoism – might actually coincide with the instincts of cooperation that might be in the origin of the rationality of Morality.73

---

72 Kropotkin supports this claim with innumerable examples. Actually, most of Chapter I and II of *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* is dedicated to show that mutual aid is indeed the norm not only in social animals but also in the so-called animal predators. (Kropotkin 2006: 8-45)
73 Some contemporary research might support Kropotkin’s claim. Brice Huebner, for instance, explains that certain colonies of ants or honeybees act as they had a *single* group mind, and not as they had different minds that cooperate together. (Huebner 2011: 4-6) Other authors, such as Karl Widerquist and Grant S.
I am not saying that there is now a valid explanation that casts doubt upon the origins of morality. I am just suggesting that a kind of plausible explanation might be available one day following Kropotkin’s path. This is precisely the profound problem with Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s “solution” to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics: that it leaves the possibility to undermine morality always open. It might just be a question of time.

3.3. Formal Analysis of the Classical Interpretations of the Profoundest Problem

In sections 3.2 and 3.3, I have argued that all classical interpretations of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics accept Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions. I have also suggested that it is precisely their acceptance of these assumptions that constrains all classical interpretations into the structure of Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument, within which they can only “solve” the Profoundest Problem by understanding the conflict between Prudence and Rational Benevolence without taking it in its full strength: that is, denying that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is violated. I believe this can be better seen if we express these assumptions formally.

First, the *Fundamental Postulate of Ethics* can be formally expressed as \((n \rightarrow (t \lor p))\).

Where:

- \(n\): Different *valid* rational procedures yield different principles each.
- \(t\): The principles do not *theoretically* conflict.

---

McCall, are also relying in Kropotkin’s notion of mutual aid. (Widerquist & McCall 2017) Now, as Lazari-Radek and Singer indicate, many authors have argued that unselfish behavior is a fundamental fact of our biological nature. (Lazari-Radek & Singer 2011: 186-187; see also Singer 2015: 76 and Sober & Wilson 1998) However, they suggest that the Principle of Rational Benevolence requires to act in a way that goes beyond the kind of altruistic behavior that can be explained in terms of group selection. I am not sure their claim is substantiated. It might be true that biologically determined altruism for the good of the species cannot explain all human altruistic behavior. However, as Kropotkin actually suggests, it might explain enough to understand how, once we acquired certain concepts – justice and equity, for instance – this initially biologically determined altruism became universal altruism.
p: The principles do not *practically* conflict.

The *Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability* can be expressed with the form: \((f \leftrightarrow r)\).

Where:

\(f\): Fundamental Postulate of Ethics.

\(r\): It is possible to always trust Practical Reason to determine right conduct.

The *Principle of Practical Reason’s Authority* can be expressed with the form: \((\neg r \leftrightarrow e)\).

Where:

\(e\): Practical Reason is plagued with a profoundest problem.
Table I illustrates the interpretation of each philosopher in terms of the truth values that they would assign to Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(f ↔ r)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>(t ∨ p)</th>
<th>(n → (t ∨ p))</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>e</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sidgwick</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>-</strong></td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parfit, Phillips, Crisp, McLeod</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>-</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brink, Frankena</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>-</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lazari-Radek &amp; Singer</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n: Different valid rational procedures yield different principles each.

f: Fundamental Postulate of Ethics.

r: Possibility to trust Practical Reason to determine right conduct.

t: The principles do not *theoretically* conflict.

p: The principles do not *practically* conflict.

e: The Profoundest Problem of Ethics.
Table II illustrates, in terms of the truth values exposed in Table I, that the arguments of all classical attempts to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics follow the same structure than what I call Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sidgwick’s Underlying Argument</th>
<th>Frankena</th>
<th>Brink</th>
<th>McLeod</th>
<th>Phillips</th>
<th>Crisp</th>
<th>Lazari-Radek &amp; Singer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Principle of Practical Reason’s Authority: ($\neg r \leftrightarrow e$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability: ($f \leftrightarrow r$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fundamental Postulate of Ethics: ($n \rightarrow (t \lor p)$)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. $n$ is true.</td>
<td>4. $n$ is false.</td>
<td>4. $n$ is false.</td>
<td>4. $n$ is true.</td>
<td>4. $n$ is true.</td>
<td>4. $n$ is true.</td>
<td>4. $n$ is false.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. $t$ is false.</td>
<td>5. $t$ is false.</td>
<td>5. $t$ is false.</td>
<td>5. $t$ is true.</td>
<td>5. $t$ is true.</td>
<td>5. $t$ is true.</td>
<td>5. $t$ is true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. $p$ is false.</td>
<td>6. $p$ is true.</td>
<td>6. $p$ is true.</td>
<td>6. $p$ is true.</td>
<td>6. $p$ is true.</td>
<td>6. $p$ is true.</td>
<td>6. $p$ is true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ($n \rightarrow (t \lor p)$) is false.</td>
<td>7. ($n \rightarrow (t \lor p)$) is true.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. $r$ is false.</td>
<td>8. $r$ is true.</td>
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<td>8. $r$ is true.</td>
<td>8. $r$ is true.</td>
<td>8. $r$ is true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. $e$ is true.</td>
<td>9. $e$ is false.</td>
<td>9. $e$ is false.</td>
<td>9. $e$ is false.</td>
<td>9. $e$ is false.</td>
<td>9. $e$ is false.</td>
<td>9. $e$ is false.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table III classifies each author in terms of seven key categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Rationality of Morality</th>
<th>Point of view</th>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Commensurability</th>
<th>Dualism</th>
<th>Profoundest Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frankena</td>
<td>Conflict-enhancing</td>
<td>Externalist</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>Prud. and Ben.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brink</td>
<td>Conflict-enhancing</td>
<td>Externalist</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Prudence.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisp</td>
<td>Conflict-mitigating</td>
<td>Externalist</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>Prud. and Ben.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillips</td>
<td>Conflict-mitigating</td>
<td>Internalist</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>Prud. and Ben.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McLoed</td>
<td>Conflict-mitigating</td>
<td>Internalist</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>Prud. and Ben.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parfit</td>
<td>Conflict-mitigating</td>
<td>Externalist</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>Prud. and Ben.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singer &amp; Lazari-Rudek</td>
<td>Conflict-mitigating</td>
<td>Internalist</td>
<td>Actual</td>
<td>Benevolence</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I am aware that each author uses different names to refer to principles or reasons, not Prudence and Rational Benevolence as Sidgwick did. I believe the exposition is clearer in this way.
Conclusions

I. An unresolved Profoundest Problem of Ethics

Even though all classical interpretations seem to disagree in fundamental claims, disagreements that would lead one to believe that no agreement is possible between them, I have argued that all their interpretations share a similar structure; they all tacitly accept what I have called Sidgwick’s Underlying Presupposition and the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics. I have also explained that Sidgwick had also accepted these two assumptions. However, unlike Sidgwick, all classical interpretations claim that the Profoundest Problem of Ethics can be solved. Why? What is the difference between Sidgwick and the classical interpretations?

I have been trying to suggest an answer in some of the objections to the classical interpretations. The answer is: while both Sidgwick and the classical interpretations accept Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, only Sidgwick took seriously the possibility that Practical Reason might really be at stake. This is not, I believe, an unsubstantiated claim.

On the one hand, David Brink, explicitly declaring to be following William Frankena, argues that the Dualism of Practical Reason cannot be a dualism between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence insofar as, if that would be so, Practical Reason would be requiring to act in accordance with inconsistent conflicting principles – both with deontic force of requirement. As this would entail that we may need to mistrust Practical Reason, they claim, it must be that what Sidgwick called the Dualism of Practical Reason needs to be understood as a conflict between a rational principle – Prudence – and a moral principle – Benevolence. In this sense, conflict-enhancing interpretations, even though they understand the conflict between Rational Egoism and Utilitarianism in its full force, they refuse to consider this conflict the Profoundest Problem of Ethics precisely because the problem that it would express seems too profound. Otherwise, they
fear, we might discover that Practical Reason might not be as trustworthy as we once assumed. Accordingly, they reduce the Profoundest Problem of Ethics to what Parfit called the moralist’s problem.

On the other hand, Derek Parfit, Owen McLeod, David Phillips, and Roger Crisp reject the possibility that we might not be able to trust Practical Reason even more strongly than David Brink and William Frankena actually did. In understanding Practical Reason as “just regrettably indeterminate”, as Phillips would say, they deny that the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence is one that we ought to rationally be seriously worried about. (Phillips 1998: 59) As Husain Sarkar claims, when examining Parfit’s solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics: the rationalist’s problem “is relatively simple, if not almost trivial, compared to the moralist’s problem.” (Sarkar 2018: 25) Sarkar is indeed right. However, the rationalist’s problem is almost trivial only insofar as Parfit, along with McLeod, Phillips, and Crisp, understands Practical Reason in a way that the rationalist’s problem is not really a problem to begin with. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics, again, seems to be reduced to the moralist’s problem. And still, as Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer claim, when understanding Practical Reason from a conflict-mitigating standpoint, morality is never completely protected. At best, we will be only required to act as Rational Benevolence dictates when Rational Benevolence and Rational Egoism do not conflict, and when they conflict, we will be permitted to act in both ways. This led Lazari-Radek and Singer to try to cast doubt upon the origins of Rational Egoist’s rationale. I attempted to show in my objection that their argument can be used to undermine morality as well.

To recapitulate, I have argued that both conflict-enhancing and conflict-mitigating interpretations, in accepting Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, while rejecting the possibility that Practical Reason might be at stake, have not approached the Profoundest Problem of Ethics as Sidgwick conceived it. Instead, they have attempted to solve another problem – the moralist’s
problem – that, while important, it is not the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. Besides, they have all failed to solve even the watered-down versions of their problem: they either appeal to inherently wrong arguments – as Frankena and Lazari-Radek and Singer do – or they fall into another unsolvable dualism.

I now want to argue that the fact that they are not approaching the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, and the fact that they have failed to solve the moralist’s problem, are closely connected. As Parfit actually understood, the key to Sidgwick’s argument in The Methods of Ethics lies in Sidgwick’s assumption that our Practical Reason can adopt two different points of view – personal and impartial – from which it yields different – though apparently valid – conflicting principles. Parfit attempted to object to Sidgwick’s Two Viewpoints Argument arguing that all reasons are based on facts that can be accessed from our actual point of view. However, following Husain Sarkar, I have argued that to preserve any form of Sidgwick’s dualism, even when understood in a conflict-mitigating way, one needs to appeal to two different points of view to give different weight to personal-neutral and person-relative facts. David Brink’s argument, as I have suggested, ultimately also rested in conceiving persons from two different incommensurable points of view.

I do not think that it is accidental that both Brink’s and Parfit’s arguments – and all other classical interpretations – ultimately lead to similar dualisms between two incommensurable points of view; dualisms that are quite similar to the Dualism of Practical Reason that originated the Profoundest Problem of Ethics. What I claim, then is that all classical interpretations, in denying the possibility that Practical Reason might yield conflicting, inconsistent principles, have not been able to perceive the depth of what Parfit called Sidgwick’s Two Viewpoints Argument, and they have fallen into the same profoundest problem that Sidgwick found – while thinking that they were actually solving it. Only Frankena and Lazari-Radek and Singer seemed to see out of the corner of their eyes the shadow of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, still lurking over the solutions of other
philosophers. Still, the solutions that they provided were no better: they still failed to perceive that the origin of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics might be rooted in the nature itself of Practical Reason. If this would be so, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics would express an even deeper problem than what Sidgwick might have thought.

II. A new approach to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

I have argued that Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions structurally underlie *The Methods of Ethics*. I have also argued that it is precisely the acceptance of these assumptions that, on the one hand, prevented Sidgwick to offer a solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics and, on the other hand, forced all classical interpretation that attempt to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics while rejecting the possibility that Practical Reason might be at stake, to only offer only a watered-down solution to a problem that it is not really profound. I want to suggest now that, if one rejects Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence is cast in a new light.

In fact, Sidgwick himself doubted about the rational validity of what I call the Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability: that is, he seems to consider that the violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics may not *necessarily* entail that we need to distrust Practical Reason. Sidgwick offers on the second to last page of *The Methods of Ethics* a distinction that I have not seen any author give it the weight that I think it has. Considering possible the harmony between Prudence and Rational Benevolence, Sidgwick claims:

> I also judge that in a certain sense this result *ought* to be realized: in this judgment, however, ‘ought’ is not used in a strictly ethical meaning; it only expresses the *vital need* that our Practical Reasons feels of providing or postulating this connexion of Virtue and self-interest, if it is to be made consistent with itself. (506; my emphases)
This citation precedes one of Sidgwick’s most famous citations, in which Sidgwick claims that if “this connexion” cannot be shown, “the apparently intuitive operation of Practical Reason, manifested in these contradictory judgments, is after all illusory”. (506) In this sense, this citation casts the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics and the Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability in a new light.

Sidgwick seems to suggest that, if we have indeed a faculty such as Practical Reason that has as its operation determining what we ought to do, we would expect that the principles that Practical Reason dictates would not conflict. This expectation is expressed in what Sidgwick calls the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics. However, when we analyze the nature of this expectation, we realize that only if we already make certain assumptions about the nature of Practical Reason, the violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics becomes a problem for Practical Reason. In other words, we would prefer that Practical Reason would dictate what we ought to do in a way in which all our acts could be deemed as right and rational – and we could never be exposed to blame or criticism. We would want that we would never find ourselves in a situation in which we deemed two actions as equally right from two different points of view, and we would be forced to choose an act that is necessarily wrong from the other point of view within our Practical Reason. However, it is only when we assume that Practical Reason cannot be in the way that we do not want it to be that the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence becomes a problem for Practical Reason. In this sense, the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics and the Principle of Practical Reason’s Reliability, as Sidgwick and all classical interpretations understand them, impose a description upon Practical Reason that makes the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence a profound problem for Practical Reason. By doing so, I argue, they miss what is really at stake in the conflict between these two rational procedures.
In the citation above, Sidgwick seems to be offering a distinction that hints that what is at stake in the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence is not Practical Reason itself, or the possibility to trust in its dictates, but our lives. In particular, Sidgwick seems to distinguish between (a) a vital need to show that the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is not violated by demonstrating the theoretical or practical harmony between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence; and (b) a rational need to show so.

The rational need to show the harmony between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence refers to the description that Sidgwick and all classical interpretations impose upon Practical Reason to claim that Practical Reason cannot do what they do not want it to do: that is, requiring to act in accordance with two conflicting principles at the same time. In accordance with this reading, the violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics necessarily entails that we cannot always trust Practical Reason insofar as it is already assumed that a Practical Reason that would lead to a violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics could not be trusted to begin with. In this way, the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence casts doubt upon the authority of Practical Reason in a way in which we believe that Ethics itself as a study of what is right or what ought to be done might not be worth of rational pursuit. It is important to realize here, though, that insofar as it is Practical Reason that seems to be at stake with this understood of Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions, it is not surprising then that conflict-enhancing and conflict-mitigating interpretations attempt to solve Sidgwick’s problem by understanding the principles of Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence in a way in which Practical Reason is not at stake. However, I have claimed, they still miss what is really at stake in the Profoundest Problem of Ethics – and for this reason they all fall in similar dualism than the Dualism of Practical Reason.

Sidgwick’s appeal to a vital need to demonstrate the harmony between the Principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence might give us a way out of this maze. We need to understand
Sidgwick’s appeal to a vital need as expressing a kind of psychological necessity akin to our human necessity to make friends, to be loved, to feel safe... In this sense, Sidgwick seems to suggest that what is really at stake if the conflict between the principles of Prudence and Rational Benevolence could not be solved is not that we may not be able to trust Practical Reason in determining what we ought to do – or that Practical Reason may be incoherent –, but the consequences in our lives that would derive from the head-on conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence.

It seems that Sidgwick is suggesting that the need to avoid the violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics is practical – or vital. Not rational. If my reading is sound, Sidgwick is casting doubt upon the conditional relation that he himself established in the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics between the fact that different valid rational procedures yield certain principles and the impossibility that these principles practically or theoretically conflict. In accordance with the rational reading of the citation above, the violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics necessarily undermines the rational authority of Practical Reason. In accordance with the vital reading of the citation, the violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics – which, on this reading, ceases to be a fundamental postulate – does not undermine the rational authority of Practical Reason. It only undermines the vital need that we humans have to have a clear, non-conflicting, dictates about what we ought to do.

Airport Dilemma here may be useful. I have explained that, in this example, you have conflicting intuitions about what you ought to do: either give your spot in the last plane to the stranger or take it for yourself. If one understands Sidgwick’s Underlying Presuppositions in terms of a rational need, the violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics by your conflicting reasons necessarily entails that you cannot trust your Practical Reason, in that case, at all; and that your decision will be based on non-rational impulses, such as your compassion for the stranger, your passion for your career, or – who knows? – maybe even your feeling of hunger at that moment.
On the other hand, if one understands the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics in terms of a *vital* need, the violation of the Fundamental Postulate of Ethics by your conflicting intuitions *just means* that you would have preferred that your reason would have given you a clear answer about what you ought to do; maybe even that you would have *preferred* that these reasons would coincide. Still, you would still have both intuitions about what you ought to do, and you would have no reason to doubt your Practical Reason. In other words, it is not that Practical Reason is leaving you without any direction *at all*.

Practical Reason is giving you two principles that are required from two different points of view; and yes, you need to decide one option knowing that, whatever you decide, the action will be regarded as wrong from the opposite incommensurable point of view.

Sidgwick, Frankena, Brink, Parfit, McLeod, Phillips, Crisp, Lazari-Radek and Singer... seem to believe that this is not plausible. The question that I ask of them is: is it – *rationally* – implausible or is it – *vitaly* – profoundly inconvenient? It is true that Sidgwick, in indicating that the object of his treatise would be to study the relation between methods, trying to define when they conflict as much as possible, seemed to *hope* that he would be able to show that ethics is not actually far from, for instance, mathematics, and that he *hoped* that the conflict between inconsistent principles would be able to be harmonized. Sidgwick’s *hope* for a solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, I believe, needs to be read in this way. But if this is so, as far as I can see, this *hope* expresses a *vital necessity* to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics; a *vital necessity* to show that a study as important as Ethics, with which we determine what we ought to do, is not actually far from mathematics. In this sense, I suggest that the Profoundest Problem of Ethic might be profound, *pace* Sidgwick, not because the conflict between Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence may question the rational authority of Practical Reason, but because it is profoundly inconvenient for our everyday lives. This is why all classical interpretations and Sidgwick failed
to solve the Profoundest Problem of Ethics: because they fail to see what is really at stake if Practical Reason is really divided against itself.

III. A solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics

The Profoundest Problem of Ethics needs to be understood as a *vital problem*, expressing a psychological necessity, and not as a *rational problem*, expressing a logical necessity to solve the conflict between Rational Egoism and Benevolence.

*We would want* that if two rational procedures yield conflicting conclusions, only one is valid. *We would want* that our Practical Reason would be such that it would not allow that different valid rational procedures yield conflicting conclusions. But, it would be a mistake to confuse this vital need with a rational or logical necessity. And it would be a mistake to claim that there is a Profoundest Problem because it turns out that the rational necessity that one has assumed is not satisfied after all. This is, I am afraid, the real shadow that casts over Ethics: a *deep denial* of what might be, for all we know, an inherently human trait; that our Practical Reason yields conflicting dictates about what we ought to do.

If we accept this duality in Practical Reason, we may understand that the solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics does not depend in us being able to show that, if we act in accordance with Practical Reason, our actions will be always right. Instead, a solution of the Profoundest Problem of Ethics, understood under my new approach, might give us an answer to the question: what is the action that, considering both points of view, is *less* wrong? That action would be the *most* rational action. One might here demand: does this mean that none of our actions can be completely right considering both points of view? There is, in fact, this unpleasant possibility.

However, I believe that being conscious that our actions may be wrong when regarded from another point of view within our Practical Reason might be better than simply, as conflict-
mitigating views do, assigning different weights to different incommensurable reasons to be able to – falsely – guarantee that one is in the right. I fear that this type of reasoning may lead to processes of justification of our own actions in which what is at stake is no longer acting rightly, but not being exposed to blame or criticism. Under their conception, we may be able to justify – give reasons for – acts that may be inherently wrong. As for myself, I prefer to live with the burden of knowing that each of my acts can be regarded as wrong from one of the points of view within my Practical Reason than justify my actions with a self-made principle that ensures that my Practical Reason is not incoherent.

In my view, the Profoundest Problem of Ethics does not cast doubt upon the authority of Practical Reason. The Profoundest Problem of Ethics is our initial situation as ethical beings that can conceive other human beings, and ourselves, from two incommensurable points of view within our Practical Reason. The solution to the Profoundest Problem of Ethics is not, then, to deny this conflict. It is to embrace the practical problem that it presents in a way that, still, we attempt to do the less harm that we can do.


Curriculum Vitae

Education

2017-Present

Louisiana State University (MA, candidate to graduate)
Department of Philosophy
Current Cumulative GPA: 4.139
Thesis: The Profoundest Problem of Ethics: About the Possibility of a Profound Solution
Committee: Husain Sarkar (Chair), Jeffrey Roland, Raff Donelson

2011-2015

Universitat de Girona – Spain (2015)
Bachelor’s Degree in Philosophy
Thesis (in Bio-ethics): An Immersion to the ‘Depth Grammar’ of the notion Health*
Advisor: Anna Quintanas Feixas
*Original Title: Una immersió en la gramàtica profounda de la salut

Areas of Interest

Ethics, Metaethics, Bioethics, Wittgenstein

Work in Progress

“Brink’s Equivocation: An Objection Against Brink’s Defense of Rational Egoism” (research paper)

Presentations

“Wittgenstein on Suicide and its relation to the essence of Ethics”, presented to the Graduate Conference, “Philosophy and Thought”, at Universitat de Girona (2015)

Honors and Awards

Edward Shirley Scholarship (March 2019)
Fulbright Scholarship to pursue a MA at Louisiana State University (2017-2019)
— 10 scholarships awarded in Spain that year 2017
Awarded to the most outstanding undergraduate in Philosophy (years 2011-2015)