

## Sidgwick's Axioms and Consequentialism

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Sidgwick gives various tests for highest certainty. When he applies these tests to common sense morality, he finds nothing of highest certainty. In contrast, when he applies these tests to his own axioms, he finds these axioms to have highest certainty.

The axioms culminate in

*Benevolence*: “[E]ach one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him” (ME 382).

Some think that the axiomatic argument for *benevolence* is Sidgwick's main argument for utilitarianism, and indeed a convincing argument.

The axioms face challenges from two sides.

First, one test requires that a claim not be denied by someone of whom one has no more reason to suspect of error than oneself. For Sidgwick, then, the egoist must not deny the axioms. But it would seem that an egoist would reject *benevolence*.

Second, Sidgwick thinks he must show that the common sense moralist agrees to the axioms. *Benevolence* seems to say that the only reason for departing from being bound to treat others like oneself is that more good would be produced. But the common sense moralist will not agree that this is the only reason. The common sense moralist thinks there are many reasons—say I have made a promise or owe gratitude to one party, or one party deserves the good.

In reply to the threat of an egoist's disagreement, I argue that many of the axioms should be read as having as their antecedent "from the point of view of the universe." I reply to the objection that this makes these axioms analytic.

In reply to the threat of a common sense moralist's disagreement, I argue that each axiom states in effect a prima facie duty. None states that it is one's duty all things considered. The argument against the common sense moralist concerns not *benevolence*, but whether there are further duties that pass the tests. I raise the worry that here Sidgwick is unfair, since sometimes he criticises all things considered versions of common sense duties; such criticisms would count against *benevolence* as well. I give some examples in which Sidgwick is fair, since he is criticising prima facie versions. But I conclude that even when understood as prima facie, *benevolence* is subject to one of the same complaints.

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