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Thomas Hurka, *British Ethical Theorists from Sidgwick to Ewing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. xiv + 310.

The protagonists in Thomas Hurka's excellent book are Henry Sidgwick, Hastings Rashdall, John MacTaggart Ellis MacTaggart, H. A. Prichard, G. E. Moore, E. F. Carritt, W. D. Ross, C. D. Broad, and A. C. Ewing. The fact that most of them had double names is but one common denominator between these philosophers; they also all lived and worked mainly in the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century and they were all attached to either Cambridge or Oxford. More importantly, their overlapping theories in metaethics and normative ethics make them a distinctive school in the history of moral philosophy. However, while their theories overlapped, they were by no means perfectly unified. As a consequence, it is not easy to find a joint label that fits each one in the Sidgwick-to-Ewing line and that would not be misleadingly broad or narrow. They are sometimes grouped under the label 'non-naturalists', but that term captures only one aspect of their shared metaethical views and leaves out their many overlapping views in normative ethics. They are also sometimes called 'intuitionists' and that term has both metaethical and normative implications. It is correct that all members of the group were metaethical intuitionists. Some of them (Prichard, Ross, Carritt) were also normative intuitionists—i.e., they believed in an irreducible plurality of moral duties with no overarching algorithm for weighing conflicting duties—but others defended different versions of utilitarianism (Sidgwick, Rashdall, MacTaggart, Moore). Hurka therefore calls the group the 'Sidgwick-to-Ewing school', or simply 'the school'.

Roughly half of the book (six out of twelve chapters) deals with metaethics, broadly construed, while the second half (five chapters) deals with normative ethics, also broadly construed. The final chapter considers the school's take on the history of moral philosophy. The school seems to have been most unified in its metaethical views. As I

have already indicated, all the school's members accepted non-naturalism about moral concepts as well as about moral properties and facts: they all thought that the meaning of moral judgements cannot be reduced to the meaning of empirical or supernatural judgements and that moral properties and facts cannot be reduced to empirical or supernatural properties and facts. According to the school's metaethical intuitionism, we can come to know fundamental non-natural moral facts only by a priori reflection or intuition.

For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the non-naturalism and intuitionism of Moore, Ross, et al, were maligned, but these views have made a remarkable comeback in recent decades. Still, the claim is sometimes made in contemporary metaethical discussions that Moore's non-naturalism was somehow more extravagant and ontologically committing than contemporary versions. A related claim is that Sidgwick's non-naturalism and intuitionism were similarly more moderate than Moore's, and also more closely related to twenty-first century non-naturalism. Hurka helpfully points out that such claims are largely mistaken and that the alleged differences are mostly illusory or overdrawn (pp. 93, 115).

A less well-known feature of the school's metaethics, which Hurka highlights and explains, is its 'conceptual minimalism'. The school's members all thought that there are a relatively small number of primitive moral concepts, in terms of which other moral concepts can be analysed. The Moore of *Principia Ethica* argued that there is only one such concept (intrinsic goodness) and he later came to hold that there are only two, namely intrinsic goodness and rightness, which are logically equivalent but not interdefinable. Broad suggested that the ought of fittingness is the sole primitive normative concept and Ewing refined and defended the idea. Ross accepted Moore's view that intrinsic value is unanalysable, but held that the concept of prima facie duty is

also unanalysable. In normative ethics, Ross held—in opposition to Moore and the other utilitarians of the school—that there is a plurality of irreducible *prima facie* duties, but not more than six or seven.

Notably, the primitive concepts that the school countenanced were all what is nowadays called thin moral concepts, like goodness, rightness, fittingness, and duty. The school tended to think that so called thick concepts, like virtue concepts, could be disentangled into thin moral, or normative, components and non-moral, or non-normative, components. It is also notable that the school's members did not countenance an evaluative notion of well-being or of what is good for a person. They certainly held elaborate views about what is intrinsically good and what makes lives intrinsically good but they did not think that there is a special evaluative and unanalysable concept of well-being or goodness-for. This is a distinctive feature of the school that contrasts with more recent trends in contemporary normative theory and metaethics. Related to the school's conceptual minimalism, as well as to its non-naturalism and intuitionism, is its view that there is, again a relatively small, number of moral truths that are *underived* in the sense that there are no further or more fundamental explanations of why they are true. This is another important feature that sets the school apart from notable strands in contemporary normative theory and metaethics, especially recent attempts to derive moral truths from what is purportedly constitutive of agency. Hurka hails the school's minimalism about moral concepts and its recognition of underived moral truths for being clarifying and methodologically sound.

Given Hurka's favourable attitude to the school's conceptual minimalism and its rejection, or at least 'non-recognition', of the present-day concept of well-being or goodness-for, it is slightly surprising that he welcomes the concept of agent-relative goodness that he claims to find in the work of some of the school's members. Hurka

notes that Sidgwick sometimes used the term 'good for', notably in his formulation of the dualism of practical reason, but Hurka argues that 'good for' here does not signify the present-day concept of well-being, but that of agent-relative goodness (pp. 36-7). But what is it to be agent-relatively good? According to Hurka it is to be good from a person's point of view, as opposed to good 'from the point of view of the universe', in Sidgwick's terms. Being good from a person's point of view is not to be equated with being perceived as good by that person, or with being good for that person. One might object, then, that it is unclear what agent-relative goodness is supposed to be. Indeed, at least one member of the school, namely Ewing, at one point expressed unease about the notion ('A Suggested Non-Naturalistic Analysis of Good', *Mind* 39 (1939): 1-22, at p. 19). Taking a cue from Sidgwick, we might attempt to understand agent-relative goodness in terms of what a particular agent, as opposed to any agent, ought to desire. But this raises questions concerning whether goodness is analysable in terms of ought. This was an issue on which the school's members disagreed among themselves and on which they made many points relevant to present-day debates about fitting attitude and buck-passing accounts of goodness (as demonstrated in the book's second chapter). Hurka does not ultimately take a stand on whether goodness can be plausibly analysed in terms of ought. It appears, however, that worries about analysing agent-neutral goodness in terms of agent-neutral ought applies equally, *mutatis mutandis*, to analyses of agent-relative goodness in terms of agent-relative ought. It is not clear, then, that we have been offered a sustainable understanding of agent-relative goodness.

While most of the school's views on metaethics are pretty well-known, its normative ethics are less prominently discussed. As I have already noted, the school was less unified in this area. Sidgwick defended hedonistic utilitarianism, while Rashdall, MacTaggart, and Moore were pluralists about intrinsic value and defended ideal

utilitarianism. Prichard, Ross, and Carritt held that the duty to promote intrinsic value is but one *prima facie* duty among many and that there are *prima facie* duties that are not determined by the intrinsic values of consequences. Ewing took a characteristically middle position and suggested that an analysis of goodness in terms of the ought of fittingness would undermine the fundamental opposition between Moorean ideal utilitarianism and Rossian deontology of *prima facie* duties. In so doing, Ewing anticipated the modern debate about ‘consequentialising’ deontological theories.

Even less well-known are the school’s extensive theories of non-moral goods (such as pleasure, aesthetic appreciation, and knowledge and achievement) and moral goods (such as virtue and desert), and of love, punishment, and distribution of goods. Hurka devotes three chapters to these topics, in which he demonstrates that the school’s contributions were both systematic and insightful. It is probably here that the book fills the largest voids in extant scholarship.

The concluding chapter of the book discusses the school’s treatment of the moral philosophies of the ancient Greeks, of Kant, and of the British moralists of the eighteenth century. The school expressed special appreciation of the work of some of the eighteenth century British rationalists, in particular Bishop Butler’s critique of egoism and Richard Price’s metaethics. Broad was especially appreciative of the latter. Hurka notes that Price’s response to the notorious ‘why be moral?’ question clearly resembles the better known response of Prichard in his famous article ‘Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?’ from 1912 (p. 269). One thing that Hurka fails to mention is the striking similarity between Price’s six ‘branches of virtue’ and Ross’s list of *prima facie* duties. Not only do they agree roughly on how many branches of virtue or *prima facie* duties there are, there is also substantial overlap in content between the two accounts. This is a

rare omission, however. The quality of the scholarship is tremendously high throughout the book.

Hurka's book leaves no doubt that the school from Sidgwick to Ewing marks a peak in the history of moral philosophy. One thing the reader is left wondering, and which it would have been interesting to see more discussion of, is why the work of the school's members do not figure more prominently in present-day normative ethics, and why their metaethical writings do not receive more attention and are not held in higher regard in contemporary debates about non-naturalism and intuitionism. Is it because contemporary moral philosophers have a short collective memory? Is it because moral philosophers today are not very interested in the history of their subject? If ever those were acceptable excuses, they are no more so with the arrival of *British Ethical Theorists from Sidgwick to Ewing*. Every moral philosopher should read it.¹

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