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**On the Ethics of Naturalism:  
Sorley and Sidgwick on ethics and evolution**

Hallvard Lillehammer

*'The doctrine of evolution, first seized upon for rebutting the arguments of the intuitional moralists, has been found to transform rather than to destroy their system'* (Sorley 1904, 169-70)

## **1. Introduction**

The contributions to moral philosophy of W. R. Sorley (1855-1935) are largely forgotten today, and Sorley's name is a rare occurrence even in the index of books treating of his active period as a philosopher.<sup>1</sup> This in spite of the fact that Sorley occupied one of the two established Chairs in philosophy at Cambridge for three decades during the 'golden age' of Cambridge philosophy, where his immediate predecessor was the much more illustrious Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) and his immediate successor the still quite well known C. D. Broad (1887-1971)).

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<sup>1</sup> There is no reference to Sorley's work in the magisterial Irwin (2009). The same goes for other standard works on the period, such as Schneewind (1977) and Hurka (2014). Some forensic attention is devoted to Sorley's work in Metz (2003); Mander (2011) and Mander (2016); more so than in Ewing (1934), in which Sorley is subject to Ewing's 'heartfelt thanks' (Ewing 1934, v). Ewing's selection of Idealist texts (Ewing 1957) finds no space for Sorley's work, although Sorley (1918) does appear in the bibliography.

It is not only when reading historical works of the period that Sorley's name is conspicuous in its absence. It is equally so conspicuous in the published works of the rising stars of the period, such as G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, John Maynard Keynes, Frank Ramsey, and Ludwig Wittgenstein (with all of whom he coincided in post), but who pay Sorley's work no significant attention. (As should become clear in due course, this is most interesting in the case of Moore.) And not only did this generation of Cambridge philosophers largely ignore Sorley. He largely ignored them as well.<sup>2</sup>

If Sorley's work is largely forgotten, this may be for good reasons, and not just because this work was eclipsed by the 'analytical' movement of rising philosophical stars, for whom his College Obituary suggests he had little time (King's College Cambridge 1935). Yet, as is often the case in the history of philosophy, the underlying facts are somewhat more complex than first appearances may suggest. In particular, Sorley's work is distinguished by his exceptional ability to critically synthesize the insights of others and articulate them in packages of what Marcus Singer has described as 'marvelously compressed information and insight' (Sidgwick 2000, xxii). In his *History of English Philosophy*, for example (the work to which Singer refers), Sorley offers more than the occasional snippet of illumination about complex issues that have

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<sup>2</sup> One exception is Sorley (1918), which contains a brief discussion of Moore (on value and organic wholes) and Russell (on infinity and external relations); both subjects of which will have interested Sorley because of his Idealist commitments. Sorley also had a very different (and non-philosophical) run-in with Russell and Keynes, to which I shall return in the Epilogue.

preoccupied philosophers in recent centuries, and some of which continue to be controversial more than a century later.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I address one such issue, namely the significance for moral epistemology of the theory of evolution, considered as one constituent part of the wider question: 'Does origin determine validity?' (Sorley 1920, 270; c.f. Ritchie 1888). More specifically, I shall address the challenge posed by so-called 'evolutionary debunking arguments' in ethics, henceforth referred to as 'the evolutionary debunking challenge' (see e.g. Lillehammer 2003; Joyce 2005; Street 2006). For the purposes of this paper, I shall take the evolutionary debunking challenge to comprise any argument that purports to undermine someone's entitlement to ethical claims in virtue of the fact that the endorsement by that someone of those claims has an evolutionary pedigree, as specified by a theory that is, in the broadest terms, 'Darwinian'. Thus understood, the evolutionary debunking challenge does not amount to the reductive claim that substantive ethical thought is replaceable by a naturalistic description of ethical thought without remainder. Nor is it equivalent to the claim that the mere truth of Darwinian theory is inconsistent with the truth of any ethical claims whatsoever (although in some of its crudest manifestations it is consistent with that claim). Finally, the evolutionary debunking challenge is not equivalent to the claim that the truth of Darwinian theory strikes a serious blow to all progressive ethical aspirations or is otherwise, in some sense, depressing news (although in some of its crudest manifestations it is consistent with that claim as well.) What

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<sup>3</sup> Sorley's *A History of English Philosophy* is notable for its discussion of Irish and Scottish philosophers as well, not just English ones.

distinguishes the family of arguments that constitutes the evolutionary debunking challenge as here understood is that they point out facts about the causal pedigree of ethical claims that allegedly undermine their standing in the same way that the standing of any claim whatsoever can be undermined by showing that it is based on some false belief or presupposition, or that it has otherwise come about as a result of some less than epistemologically robust process of development.

While it is currently a subject of much controversy, the evolutionary debunking challenge was already a topic of concern among academics and public intellectuals in the decades following the publication in 1871 of Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (see e.g. Lillehammer 2010; 2016; 2017). Furthermore, while the details of the arguments and the names of the participants have changed, the basic structure of the arguments offered in response to the evolutionary debunking challenge have largely remained the same, as I will shortly illustrate in the case of Sorley's contribution to this topic. My particular focus of discussion will be a series of passages in his book *The Ethics of Naturalism*, first published in 1885, with a second edition appearing in 1904 (Sorley 1885; 1904).<sup>4</sup>

The case for revisiting Sorley's discussion of ethics and evolution is not exhausted by the purely antiquarian interest of unearthing the work of a

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from *The Ethics of Naturalism*, Sorley's main philosophical works are *Recent Tendencies in Ethics* (1904); *The Moral Life and Moral Worth* (1911); *Moral Values and the Idea of God* (1918); and *A History of English Philosophy* (1920). See e.g. Metz 2003, 253-58; 393-96. I shall make references to some of these works in what follows where there this is relevant to the focus of discussion, but I shall make no attempt to give a synoptic view of Sorley's philosophical outlook in this paper.

philosopher who in spite of his professional standing at the time is now largely forgotten.

First, Sorley's response to the evolutionary debunking challenge provides fresh insights to our understanding of the intellectual context of Sidgwick's much more influential Intuitionist response to that challenge; a response which Sorley follows closely but does not merely repeat.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Sorley's response to the evolutionary debunking challenge can arguably be read as an attempt to produce an improvement, or 'synthesis', of those of Sidgwick and Frederick Pollock (1846-1937), the latter of whom wrote a response to Sidgwick's 1876 *Mind* paper on the topic, to which Sidgwick then (if not very charitably) responded (Pollock 1876; Sidgwick 2000). One way of reading Sorley's response to the debate between Sidgwick and Pollock (with an important caveat to be made shortly) is as providing a template for what Sidgwick *could* have said in response to Pollock but *didn't* say, and as doing so by making use of theoretical insights derived from a philosophical tradition external to Sidgwick's Intuitionism in a way that is basically friendly to it.

Second, the aforementioned feature of Sorley's response to the evolutionary debunking challenge represents a distinctive example of the approach to the study of the epistemological credentials of ethical intuitions among representatives of Nineteenth Century British Idealism. (Given that Sidgwick was an Intuitionist, and that Idealism and Intuitionism offer what is commonly

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect of Sidgwick's work is not addressed in Schultz (1992), but is discussed in Lillehammer (2011) and Lazari-Radek & Singer (2014). See also Crisp (2015).

regarded as mutually incompatible answers to the question of how the history of ethical thought relates to its epistemology, this fact is what gives substance to the caveat mentioned in the previous paragraph.) Sorley's forensic engagement with Sidgwick on this topic is worthy of attention for at least the following reasons. First, although the implications of evolution for the study of ethical thought was subject to intensive discussion in the last two decades of the Nineteenth Century, much of that discussion was focused not on the epistemological question of evolutionary debunking, but on a series of more practical questions, such as the discussion of whether the incorporation of Darwinian evolutionary theory into ethical thought would have 'progressive' political implications (see e.g. Ritchie 1889; Freedman 1976; 1978; Weinstein 2007; Tyler 2012). Second, when Sorley's Idealist contemporaries explicitly touch on the implications of evolutionary theory for moral epistemology, they often do so by painting with a very broad brush. Thus, when T. H. Green (1836-1882) considers the possibility that 'the doctrines of evolution and descent' might be thought to imply a skeptical view of ethical thought as a 'serviceable illusion (Green 1883, 10; 12), he is not specifically writing about the debunking potential of the evolutionary history of ethical intuitions, but more crudely of 'the elimination of ethics' in favor of a purely descriptive 'natural science' of human beings (Green 1883, 11).<sup>6</sup> And when D. G. Ritchie (1853-1903) considers the implications of evolutionary theory for ethical thought in his 'Origin and Validity' (Ritchie 1888), his main point is that 'the history of moral ideas and the

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<sup>6</sup> The one naturalist philosopher explicitly mentioned by Green in this discussion is David Hume (1711-1776). His discussion of Sidgwick later in *Prolegomena* is primarily focused on Sidgwick's hedonism, not on the implications of evolutionary theory for ethical thought. See e.g. Dimova-Cookson & Mander (2006) for a recent collection of papers on Green's thought.

psychology of moral sentiments... do not explain why there should be any thinking right or wrong at all' in the absence of 'an ideal, a judgement of "ought", else morality would be impossible' (Ritchie 1888, 77). Once again, the target of Ritchie's claim (published four years after the appearance of Sorley's *On the Ethics of Naturalism*) is the basic inadequacy of any reductive form of naturalism, not the debunking potential of the evolutionary origins of ethical intuitions. What Sorley shares with his Idealist contemporaries, however, is the view that contemporary forms of Intuitionism are 'only revivals or survivals of the old 'metaphysical' (in the *bad* sense) doctrine of innate ideas' (Ritchie 1888, 67). It is the forensic detail with which Sorley's discussion brings this criticism to bear on Sidgwick's response to the evolutionary debunking challenge that constitutes its claim to separate attention.

Third, Sorley's response to the evolutionary debunking challenge can be read as an early precursor of two influential lines of thought in contemporary meta-ethics. The first of these lines of thought is one that is currently associated with 'non-naturalist', or 'non-reductionist', meta-ethical theories according to which the explanation of ethical value and normativity is itself normative at 'bedrock' (see e.g. Kramer 2009; Enoch 2011; Parfit 2011; 2017; Scanlon 2014). The second line of thought is one associated with the moral and political epistemology of what has come to be known as 'the method of reflective equilibrium' (see e.g. Rawls 1971; Lazari-Radek & Singer 2014). Of course, the vocabulary of 'reflective equilibrium' was not available to philosophers writing in the Nineteenth Century, so any attribution to Sorley and his contemporaries of these epistemological commitments will suffer from an element of anachronism.



Even so, the classification of Sidgwick (1907) as an important predecessor of this line of thought is well established in the literature, even if it fails to fully capture every aspect of what goes on in *The Methods of Ethics*. Most relevant for present purposes is the role, if any, that fundamental intuitions, or ‘axioms’, play in the process of seeking reflective equilibrium. I shall explore this issue in the context of Sorley’s discussion of Sidgwick’s response to the evolutionary debunking challenge below.

Fourth, Sorley’s response to the evolutionary debunking challenge raises an as yet unresolved question about what, if anything, we should expect by way of philosophical explanation at the level of moral, or normative, bedrock. It raises this question in a provocative way because although Sorley officially has such an explanation to hand (namely an account of value, meaning and purpose in robustly Idealist terms), that explanation actually plays little, or no, role in his rebuttal of the evolutionary debunking challenge in the passages discussed in this paper. As I shall argue, this feature of Sorley’s argument is not only one that speaks in its favor his response to that challenge, it is also a feature of his argument that is of direct relevance to the current debate for and against so-called ‘relaxed’ forms of meta-ethical realism; sometimes also known as ‘non-realist cognitivism’ (see e.g. Parfit 2011; 2017; Scanlon 2014). Indeed, I shall suggest that this is a meta-ethical view that plays a dialectical role in philosophical debate at the start of the Twenty-first Century that is in important ways comparable to that played by Idealism at the end of the Nineteenth. Yet where Idealism might now be thought to have offered an explanation for the irreducibility of ethical truths that is ultimately implausible, its latter day

‘relaxed’ descendant (as explicitly conceded by some of its main proponents) appears to offer little, or no, explanation at all.

## **2. Biographical context**

William Ritchey Sorley was born in Selkirk, Scotland in 1855. He was a student at Edinburgh and Cambridge, where he did Part II of the Moral Sciences Tripos in 1882. In 1883, he was elected a Fellow of Trinity College; subsequently going on to hold academic posts in London, Cardiff and Aberdeen, before becoming Knightbridge Professor in Moral Philosophy at Cambridge in 1900; a Professorial Fellow of King’s College in 1901; and a Fellow of the British Academy in 1905. During his tenure at Cambridge he served on a number of University committees (more of which below) as well as on the University Press Syndicate. Upon his death in 1935, Sorley had the rare posthumous privilege of having his ashes buried in the west end of King’s College Chapel and a permanent sundial dedicated to his name in the north-east corner of Front Court. To this day, the only other person to have a standing monument to his name in the Front Court of King’s is its founder, King Henry VI.<sup>7</sup>

In his 1936 obituary, J. H. Muirhead described Sorley’s *The Ethics of Naturalism* as ‘perhaps still the most thorough-going criticism of the attempt, represented in these days by such writers as Herbert Spencer and Leslie Stephen, to explain the rise of moral consciousness by appeal to the facts of biological and social

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<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Ross Harrison for generously providing this, and other, personal information about Sorley’s time at King’s.

evolution' (Muirhead 1936, 120; see also Stout 1936). As already noted, Sorley published two editions of this book; the first in 1885 and the second in 1904, following his appointment to the Knightbridge Chair. (The first edition was a version of his Trinity College Fellowship dissertation.) The differences between the two editions are slight, but not without interest. While the first edition is entitled *On the Ethics of Naturalism*, the second is entitled *The Ethics of Naturalism: a criticism*. If the intention behind this change is to give the impression that its focus is primarily critical, that impression is confirmed by the text itself. In particular, it is interesting to note the removal of much of the Idealist baggage from the final chapter in the 1904 edition.<sup>8</sup> If *The Ethics of Naturalism: a critique* is a book written by an Idealist, it is one written by an Idealist who is keeping his metaphysical cards closer to his chest.<sup>9</sup>

As for the motivations for publishing a second edition, Sorley writes in the new preface that '[t]he call for a new edition has led to a careful revision of the whole argument, as well as to the incorporation of references to recent literature' (Sorley 1904, vii).<sup>10</sup> Where this call has come from he does not say; but it is

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<sup>8</sup> Commenting on the First Edition, Mander comments that in spite of the book showing 'some originality', the constructive parts read like 'a virtual paraphrase of Green' (Mander 2011, 219). It is therefore not without interest that the Second Edition includes only two passing references to Green's work. In any case, the present paper is focused on an aspect the book where the 'some originality' aspect is more in evidence.

<sup>9</sup> The contrast with *Recent Tendencies in Ethics* (Sorley 1904b), published in the same year as the new edition of *The Ethics of Naturalism*, is striking in this regard. (The same can be said, and even more emphatically, about Sorley (1918).

<sup>10</sup> The most important reference in this regard is arguably T. H. Huxley's 1893 Romanes Lecture, 'Evolution and Ethics' (see Huxley 1947). It does not include G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (Moore 1903); a work to which Sorley makes no reference. The fact that Moore's work is hardly discussed in Sorley's later work either suggests that this is not down to Sorley's being unaware of, or being

natural to assume that having recently taken up high office, the author was keen to see a re-launch of the philosophical work with which he had made his name.

### 3. The argument

In the preface to the second edition, Sorley states that ‘the chief purpose of this work is to arrive at an exact estimate of the ethical significance of the theory of evolution’ (Sorley 1904, v). The key passages of interest to the present enquiry occupy just over five pages in each edition of the book, and are found in Chapter VI, ‘Evolution and Ethical Theories’; pp. 129-134 of the 1885 edition; and Chapter VII, ‘Evolution and Ethical Theories’, pp. 172-177 of the 1904 edition. Apart from a few additions, the passages in question read the same across the two editions. In this section, I shall interpret these passages under three separate headings (mine, not Sorley’s), namely: i) what does the theory of evolution imply about the origins of ethical thought?; ii) what does the theory of evolution imply about the epistemology of ethical thought?; iii) what does the theory of evolution *not* imply about the epistemology of ethical thought?

#### *i) What the theory of evolution implies about the origins of ethical thought*

According to Sorley, what he alternatively calls ‘the doctrine’ or ‘theory’ of evolution offers an explanation of the ‘seemingly intuitive character of moral ideas’ by showing how ‘their immediate necessity for the individual of the

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unable to consult, it (see e.g. Sorley 1918). A more plausible hypothesis is that Sorley regarded Moore’s ethics as a representative of a discredited form of Intuitionism.

present day may be reconciled with their empirical origin in the mental history of the race' (Sorley 1904, 170). In doing so, the doctrine enables us to overcome the limitations of two rival theories of ethical thought of great historical prominence, namely 'Egoism' and 'Intuitionism'. Egoism is overcome by showing that the moral individual is not naturally an egoist (either of a hedonistic or any other variety), but rather motivated to promote the interests of its group, or kind. Intuitionism is overcome by showing that the felt 'immediate necessity' of widely shared ethical intuitions is empirically explicable (although not thereby explained 'away' (171)) in terms of its social function of preserving the species over time, as described by the theory of natural selection. Sorley variously describes the effects of this process as an 'organic union between individuals' (170); 'a peculiar harmony of sympathy between the feelings of the individuals and the fortunes of society'; a 'pre-established harmony' (171); and as effecting a 'compromise between the 'intuitional' and the 'empirical' psychology of morals' (172). Although Sorley's talk of 'organic union' and 'pre-established harmony' in this context is strictly speaking external to what we now think of as the theory of evolution, it is not external to his Idealist interpretation of that theory (see e.g. Boucher 2014, 307; 312). I shall return to the significance of this point shortly.

ii) *What the doctrine of evolution implies about the epistemology of ethical thought*

According to Sorley, the theory of evolution delivers at least two significant results with respect to the epistemology of ethical thought.

First, the facts of evolution entail the ‘abandonment of the old intuitional method’ in moral philosophy insofar as Intuitionism is taken to imply that ethical intuitions are ‘rules of conduct from which no appeal could be taken’ (Sorley 1904, 177). The ‘intuitional method’ fails because in light of evolution it is always appropriate to ask (at least in principle) what the function (or effect) of any given intuition either is (or has been) in any given context; whether that function (or effect) is one of which we reflectively approve; and whether that function (or effect) is sufficiently stable across contexts (such as historical change) in order for us to be able to reliably trust the intuition in question for a given purpose. To this extent, Sorley’s approach departs from that of Sidgwick, for whom at least *some* intuitions are independently regarded as having the status of self-evident axioms of practical reason. Of course, given the highly abstract nature of Sidgwick’s axioms of practical reason and the somewhat tortuous route we have to follow in order to arrive at them, it may reasonably be asked how substantial the difference between Sidgwick and Sorley is on this point. Having said that, the textual evidence supports the view that Sidgwick and Sorley are, in fact, pulling in different directions here. This is evident not only in Sidgwick’s dogmatic rejection of the relevance of evolution to ethics in his 1876 response to Pollock (Sidgwick 2000, 10-22), but also in the way that Idealists like Sorley considered the Intuitionist appeal to self-evident axioms of practical reason as being epistemologically inferior in virtue of its failure to take account of the historical dynamics of ethical thought, in recognition of which what may seem self-evident at one time and place may come to seem like a mere prejudice at another..

Second, the facts of evolution (along with other historical, social and psychological facts) provide relevant and reflectively probative materials for the piecemeal evaluation of moral intuitions, such as ‘the range and manner of their ethical application’ (Sorley 1904, 173). Such evaluation may deliver different results, from suggesting that some generally beneficial ‘social state could not continue to exist were these moral judgments habitually disregarded in conduct’ (174) to suggesting that the intuitions in question ‘may be traced to institutions which, from their occasional and unprogressive character, may be shown to be neither necessary nor beneficial’ (174).<sup>11</sup> In consequence, ‘[t]he evolutionist will... contend that different degrees of value for the regulation of conduct belong to different moral intuitions or classes of them’ (Sorley 1904, 174), and will therefore regard the intuitions in question ‘as having the force of hypothetical imperatives in relation to ends which themselves possess different degrees of social utility’ (175).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> When discussing the question of ‘origin and validity’ as applied to politics, G. D. Ritchie makes a point that strongly resonates with Sorley’s argument on this score when he writes: ‘It is a mistake to suppose that, because an institution now serves certain purposes, it was created for these purposes; but, when we know how an institution came into being, we have still, as practical persons, to ask ourselves: ‘What purposes does it now serve? – else we do not estimate it rightly’ (Ritchie 1888, 78). Ritchie’s example is The House of Lords, which only serves to confirm the continuing relevance of the question. Sorley does not refer to Ritchie’s discussion in Sorley (1904), although the title of Ritchie’s paper appears virtually verbatim in Sorley (1920, 270),

<sup>12</sup> The sentence invoking the concept of a ‘hypothetical imperative’ is one of a small number of passages in this chapter of the 1904 edition that do not occur in the 1885 edition. One example given by Sorley of a judgment that *would* survive knowledge of its historical pedigree on his terms is ‘respect for the rights of property’ (Sorley 1904, 174). Both the property example and the talk of ‘ends’ in this passage can be traced back to Pollock (1876), which Sorley also cites in this context.

Moving beyond the question of the epistemological status of particular ethical intuitions, Sorley goes on to add that in evaluating the presence of a given intuition in ethical thought, due consideration must be given to the practical challenges involved in its 'disappearance'. For although it is plausible that 'as soon as the reason of the instinctive tendency is enquired into, its force as instinct is weakened' (Sorley 1904, 175), it is equally plausible that 'the moral intuitions which lead to conduct that has ceased to serve a purpose... are often even more powerful than those which protect such virtues as justice and veracity' (176). In other words, there could in principle be situations in which even an intuition that is reflectively unstable considered on its own merits, or otherwise without any independent rational foundation, can earn its continued place in moral practice because the costs of making it go away are presently too high, or even prohibitive. I shall return to this potentially 'conservative' aspect of Sorley's approach to ethical thought in the Epilogue.

There are at least three significant features of these passages from Sorley's discussion of Sidgwick's response to the evolutionary debunking challenge that merit separate comment. First, Sorley's diagnosis of the theory of evolution as applied to ethical thought implies its potential as an epistemological tool for either the *debunking* or the *vindication* of garden variety ethical intuitions (and other moral judgments) based on an empirically tractable comparison of their historical function with their present or likely future effects. He writes: 'It certainly does not follow that they [our moral intuitions] are of no moral value, merely because their origin can be traced to simpler elements of experience' (Sorley 1904, 179). Sorley therefore disagrees with those who regard the facts of



evolution as themselves debunking the credentials of ethical thought as such (c.f. Cobbe 1872; Joyce 2005).

Second, this diagnosis assigns an epistemological significance to evolutionary considerations primarily as part of piecemeal 'first order' (or 'substantially ethical') criticism. In this respect, Sorley's discussion is consistent with the theoretical approach of those who see evolutionary considerations as being primarily relevant to the debunking of certain aspects of ethical thought in favor of others insofar as its reflective stability might require the rejection of some ethical claims as being products of prejudice, bias, or dispositions which - although they might have been adaptive or otherwise admirable in the past - are no longer adaptive or otherwise admirable in the present (c.f. Greene 2013; Lazari-Radek & Singer 2014.)

Third, the application of this tool of rational criticism essentially involves the application of substantial ethical judgments in evaluating the function and effects of any given intuition, and is therefore based on a non-reductive conception of how rationally probative evolutionary criticism of ethical claims would work. To this extent, Sorley's argument is consistent with the approach of those who favor a non-naturalist, or non-reductionist, approach to moral epistemology today (see e.g. Kramer 2009; Enoch 2011).

Just as there is no attempt on Sorley's part to dismiss evolutionary considerations as entirely irrelevant to substantial ethical reflection, there is no attempt on his part to infer an 'ought' from an 'is', or otherwise falling foul of

what - following Moore - we now know as 'the naturalistic fallacy' (Moore 1903). Thus, in *Recent Tendencies in Ethics*, published in the same year as the second edition of *On the Ethics of Naturalism*, Sorley writes that although 'the ethical significance of evolution is not deep enough to give any answer to the fundamental question of morals', this is in no way a criticism of the theory considered as science, as opposed to 'of the Naturalism which professes to be a final philosophy' (Sorley 1904b, 84). In its latter aspect, he agrees with his Idealist contemporaries that evolutionary theory, considered purely descriptively, 'makes no contribution at all to these questions of worth or validity' (Sorley 1904b, 74-5; c.f. Green 1883, 11; Ritchie 1888, 77). In *Moral Value and the Idea of God*, we are once again warned to observe 'the distinction which they [the evolutionary ethicists] have so palpably ignored - the distinction between 'is' and 'ought', between existence and value or goodness' (Sorley 1918, 15). A primary target here is the evolutionary ethics of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), of whom Sorley says that he 'quietly assumes as self-evident a proposition which is... strictly speaking ethical - the proposition that pleasure and pleasure alone is good' (Sorley 1918, 14).<sup>13</sup>

iii) *What the doctrine of evolution does not imply about the epistemology of ethical thought*

Sorley denies that the relevance to moral epistemology of the theory of evolution is that its truth presents a skeptical debunking challenge to ethical thought as such (Sorley 1904, 173). First, and following Sidgwick, he points out that 'it

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the substance of this accusation, see Lillehammer (2017).

cannot be held that moral intuitions are invalid because evolved' (176). In making this point, he quotes two passages from Sidgwick's *Methods* (which he is reading in its Sixth, and penultimate, edition). In the first passage, Sidgwick asserts that in order for the causes of ethical intuitions to undermine their authority it must be shown that 'these causes are of a kind that tend to produce invalid beliefs' (Sorley 1904, 172). In the second passage, Sidgwick points out that 'the evolutionist' goes wrong if she thinks a 'general demonstration of the derivedness or development of our moral faculty can supply an adequate reason for distrusting it' because if the derivedness in question were to have this effect, the demonstration of that derivedness (which is itself an exercise of a faculty so derived) would be self-undermining (Sorley 1904, 176).<sup>14</sup> Second, he writes that '[t]he general attitude of the evolution-theory to moral intuitions is... very similar to that which Sidgwick has reached as a result of his elaborate examination of the maxims of common-sense. It is an attitude of trust, tempered by criticism' (Sorley 1904, 177). This claim is much less obviously a straightforward application of Sidgwick's published approach to the evolutionary debunking challenge, and is therefore worthy of further scrutiny.

Sidgwick's approach to the morality of 'common-sense' in *The Methods of Ethics* is to examine it for coherence and consistency with the aim of showing that it can be formalized as a single and coherent system. In so doing, he subjects the intuitions of common sense 'to the searching test of logical consistency, and their capability of being applied to conduct' (Sorley 1904, 177; Sidgwick 1907).

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<sup>14</sup>The idea that a generalized skeptical evolutionary debunking challenge would be self-undermining reappears elsewhere in Sorley's work as well. (See e.g. Sorley 1910, 164ff; 1920, 72.)

Following the influence of Rawls (1971) and others in the Twentieth Century, it is sometimes said that Sidgwick's argument in *The Methods* is that Hedonistic Utilitarianism is the ethical theory to emerge in a state of reflective equilibrium, once the intuitions of common sense have been reflectively put to test (see e.g. Lazari-Radek & Singer 2014, 94ff). Yet in his official response to the epistemological challenge posed by the theory of evolution, Sidgwick does *not* appeal to the piecemeal integration of evolutionary and other historical knowledge in the search for a state of reflective equilibrium, but instead briskly dismisses the theory of evolution as having 'little or no bearing upon ethics' (Sidgwick 2000, 11). Sidgwick's official view, in his published work, is that any attempt to debunk ethical thought on the basis of its origins is bound to bring all other forms of human thought down with it and is therefore self-undermining. No evolutionary debunking argument therefore has the potential to undermine our ethical knowledge, which is based on our grasp of basic, self-evident principles of practical reason. As has already been pointed out, it might be worried that there is an underlying tension here. The tension in question arises from the fact that the appeal to self-evident principles is a paradigmatically foundationalist approach to explain the existence of ethical knowledge and justification, whereas the appeal to reflective equilibrium is more naturally associated with a coherentist approach. It is arguably no accident in this context, therefore, that a key historical source of coherentism is exactly the kind of Idealism in which Sorley's approach to moral epistemology is ultimately rooted.<sup>15</sup> Yet the relevant point for present purposes is not that there is a

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<sup>15</sup> Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the merits and significance of the distinction between a coherentist and a foundationalist approach to moral

potential tension between applying a ‘method’ of reflective equilibrium and appealing to knowledge of basic self-evident principles in responding to the evolutionary debunking challenge. The relevant point for present purposes is that at this stage in his discussion Sorley refrains from endorsing the briskly dismissive response to the evolutionary challenge adopted by Sidgwick in favor of a more ecumenical response that is: a) less dogmatic than Sidgwick’s; b) potentially a better response for Sidgwick to have made in response to that challenge;<sup>16</sup> and c) arguably a more reasonable response to make, all things considered. Indeed, when considered in light of Sorley’s diagnosis of the evolutionary debunking challenge, Sidgwick’s official response reads exactly like the view dismissed by Sorley and his Idealist contemporaries as ‘the old intuitional method’, which interprets moral intuitions as ‘rules of conduct from which no appeal could be taken’ (Sorley 1904, 177).

In spite of the aforementioned fact that Intuitionism and Idealism are naturally read as pulling in different directions on this issue, there is no conclusive evidence in the relevant passages that Sorley thinks there is a deep tension between his own view and Sidgwick’s on this matter. Perhaps the clearest indication that Sorley did not see a deep tension between his own approach and that of Sidgwick is his claim, in the course of his discussion of the evolutionary

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epistemology here. For further discussion, see e.g. Audi (2004).

<sup>16</sup> In a footnote, Sorley briefly mentions Pollock’s discussion of the possibility of applying ‘a utilitarian test on inherited instincts’, a possibility towards which Sidgwick could in principle have taken a positive view (Pollock 1876; Sorley 1904, 173). One respect in which Pollock’s approach differs from Sorley’s is in Pollock’s rejection of the existence of what he calls ‘absolute’ or ‘non-relative’ value (Pollock 1876, 338). To pursue the implications of this disagreement here would take me too far afield.

debunking challenge and the morality of common-sense, that '[i]n both an appeal is made from the Axioms themselves' (Sorley 1904, 177). There are at least two consistent ways to read what Sorley is saying in this passage, on one of which he adopts the language of axioms on Sidgwick's Intuitionist terms, and on the other of which the idea of something being 'axiomatic' takes on some alternative interpretation. Unfortunately, this one piece of text is insufficient to settle the issue. In any case, there is a big difference between a) responding to empirical evidence (whether evolutionary or not) about the origins of ethical intuitions by bringing this evidence to bear on a rational process in which those intuitions are reflectively tested in light of their coherence with existing beliefs; and b) responding to that evidence by assuming from the outset that some of our beliefs are – in virtue of their content – immune from rational revision in virtue of their self-evidence. Although it is possible that Sidgwick's considered view is that the scope of a), while perfectly real, is substantially restricted by b) in the case of his basic axioms of practical reason, it is a significant virtue of Sorley's discussion that, at least as developed in *The Ethics of Naturalism*, it leaves open the possibility of an alternative that is somewhat less dogmatic. After all, and as Sorley points out, the 'immediate necessity' and 'intuitive character' of our ethical ideas is itself a fact that may have an evolutionary or historical explanation, and therefore a fact that ought itself to be open to empirically tractable and critical reflection.

#### 4. Wishful thinking?

Although Sidgwick is explicitly on record as having thought that the grounding of ethical intuitions in self-evident axioms of practical reason would suffice to immunize ethical thought from any evolutionary debunking challenge with universal scope, he did not think the ability to escape such an argument would thereby suffice to protect ethical thought from every form of skeptical threat whatsoever. On the contrary, Sidgwick famously worried that his candidate axioms of practical reason were inescapably in conflict, in particular with respect to the way in which the Utilitarian requirement of impartiality will sometimes require actions contradicting the Prudential requirement to promote one's own self-interest over time, this giving rise to the infamous 'dualism of practical reason' (Sidgwick 1907, 200-206; 507-509; c.f. Lazari-Radek & Singer 2014; Crisp 2015). In other words, Sidgwick's appeal to self-evident principles of practical reason was considered, even by himself, as insufficient on its own to guarantee the 'pre-established harmony' between 'the feelings of the individuals and the fortunes of society' that Sorley writes about in *The Ethics of Naturalism* (Sorley 1904, 171). Insufficient, that is, in the absence of a Higher power that would guarantee the confluence of morality and self-interest in the long run, if only in the Afterlife. Sorley's approach to the evolutionary debunking challenge, by not availing itself of Sidgwick's appeal to self-evident axioms, is not obviously any worse off as a result.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In his *History of English Philosophy*, Sorley argues that Sidgwick got himself into this pickle by conflating the distinction between egoism and altruism with one between temporal relativity and temporal neutrality (Sorley 1920, 280-281). Establishing the merits of this diagnosis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Yet in the absence of self-evident axioms of practical reason to explain the foundations of moral knowledge, what is there? Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Sorley's response to the evolutionary debunking challenge in *The Ethics of Naturalism* is that the main substance of it can be read as requiring little or no appeal to any alternative explanation. The relatively few things that Sorley has to say on the subject in this book are largely confined to the final chapter (entitled 'On the Basis of Ethics' in the 1885 edition, and 'Conclusion' in the 1904 edition), where Sorley comes clean about the nature of his commitment to some form of Idealism (c.f. Green 1883; Ritchie 1888; 1889; Seth 1894).<sup>18</sup> According to this view, 'reality' is ultimately to be explained as 'depending upon and expressing mind' (Sorley 1904, 332), and 'the moral ideas and institutions of man' are regarded as 'factors in the movement which leads in time from nature to spirit' (Sorley 1904, 333). In the 1885 edition, Sorley writes: 'the reference to self is, from the outset, implicitly, but logically, assumed in tracing the sequence of events which forms the subject-matter of the theory of evolution, while the course of development does nothing more than render its implication explicit' (Sorley 1885, 282).<sup>19</sup> On this view, when we say that the process of evolution has

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<sup>18</sup> The most comprehensive view of how Sorley's ethics is integrated with the rest of his thought is contained in *Moral Value and the Idea of God*, in which he offers the reader something that he calls 'the moral argument'. He writes: 'And I cannot here do better than give the argument in the words of Dr. Rashdall... 'A moral ideal can exist nowhere and nohow but in a mind; an absolute moral ideal can exist only in a Mind from which all reality is derived. Our moral ideal can only claim objective validity in so far as it can rationally be regarded as the revelation of a moral ideal eternally existing in the mind of God'' (Sorley 1918, 351). (The text quoted by Sorley is from Rashdall (1907, 212). See also Martineau (1886, 424)).

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of the Idealist tradition which Sorley's later work is associated, see e.g. Green 1883; Ritchie 1889; Seth 1894; Sturt 1902, v-viii;



an 'end' we should understand that claim quite literally (322), and as implying that 'the ethical element which is manifested latest in the temporal process, is presupposed from the first and necessary to the understanding of the whole' (Sorley 1904, 333).<sup>20</sup>

It is a point worth re-emphasizing with respect to the interpretation of the passages in Sorley's book where he addresses the evolutionary debunking challenge that whereas this part of the book remains largely unchanged across the two editions, the final chapter underwent quite substantial changes between the 1885 and 1904 editions; in particular with reference to the elaboration of the author's underlying Idealist commitments. It is a notable difference between the two editions, for example, that where the earlier version makes explicit reference to Hegel and other authors in the German Idealist tradition (see e.g. Sorley 1885, 290), a number of these references have been removed from the 1904 edition, where the discussion of Idealism appears only very briefly at the end of the chapter. Hence, the 1904 edition does *not* contain statements like the following: 'it is because this process [of evolution] is determined by reason that the world is the object of knowledge and the sphere of moral action. Evolution is thus not the foundation of morality, but the manifestation of the principle on which it depends.' (Sorley 1885, 291). The ease with which much of the Idealist baggage was excised from the 1904 edition adds further support to the

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Dewey 1934; Long 2000; Metz 2003; Mander 2011; Boucher 2014; Mander 2016.

<sup>20</sup> It is ironic, if not entirely surprising, that the 'transcendental' form of argument associated with Idealism has seen something of a revival in recent meta-ethics, albeit without invoking any of its associated Idealist baggage. (See e.g. Enoch 2011 for an appeal to the 'deliberative indispensability' of moral truths in defence of a 'robust' form of moral realism.)

hypothesis that, at least insofar as the topic of the present paper is concerned, it bears relatively little load-bearing weight.

The plausibility or otherwise of Idealism, whether in the work of Sorley or any of its more illustrious protagonists, is not the point at issue in this paper. The point at issue here is that the core of the response to the evolutionary debunking challenge attributed to Sorley in the previous section (i.e. that a significant set of common-sense ethical intuitions would be likely to survive in a state of wide reflective equilibrium) is logically independent of the Idealist theoretical underpinnings of that response. It is therefore an approach to that challenge that could in principle be accepted even by those who are prepared go no further along Sorley's path than to accept the non-reductionist aspect of his theoretical framework, while keeping their options open about its wider theoretical implications. To take just one example, a number of contemporary defenders of ethical cognitivism can plausibly be read as going *just this far* along Sorley's path, insofar as they insist on an irreducibly normative explanation of claims to ethical truth and knowledge, but then refuse to give any substantial account at all (whether Idealist or robustly Realist) in order to further 'ground' those claims to truth or knowledge in either naturalistic or non-naturalistic terms (see e.g. Kramer 2009; Parfit 2011; 2017; Scanlon 2014). Some of the Cognitivist (and sometimes Realist) rhetoric of the meta-ethical present can therefore be seen to echo the Idealist rhetoric of the Nineteenth Century, with much of which contemporary cognitivists might 'relaxedly' concur. The following passage from *Moral Values and the Idea of God* is typical of the genre:

‘We say of them [ethical principles] not that they exist, but that they are valid; but their validity cannot be separated from their implication in reality. To be valid is not the same thing as to exist, but it is to be valid *of reality*, so that this validity is included in the nature of reality’ (Sorley 1918, 189; See also 480ff; Sorley 1904, 68ff),

Contemporary cognitivists of a metaphysically relaxed persuasion might find a suitably reworded version of this passage (e.g. one phrased in terms of ‘truth’ rather than ‘validity’) quite congenial.<sup>21</sup>

Going along with Sorley even this far, however, is hardly a trivial matter, and arguably constitutes a significant step with respect to the main issue discussed in this paper. For it is exactly this non-reductionist aspect of Sorley’s approach that lends initial plausibility to a piecemeal, as opposed to a wholesale, response to the evolutionary debunking challenge, and which has therefore become part and parcel of the standard non-skeptical response to that challenge in contemporary meta-ethics. To establish that Sorley’s discussion of that challenge in *On the Ethics of Naturalism* contains a cogent precursor to that response is therefore sufficient to demonstrate the continuing interest of the grapplings of Sidgwick’s less illustrious successor with a theoretical issue that continues to be regarded with much seriousness in the contemporary literature.

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<sup>21</sup> The same could be said for contemporary cognitivists who shy away from the ‘realist’ label while purporting to offer a substantial explanation of ethical truth on explicitly non-realist terms. See e.g. Skorupski 2011.

## 5. Epilogue

In an oddly prescient passage of *The Ethics of Naturalism*, Sorley writes as follows:

‘Nor does it seem possible to assert with confidence... that the strongest impulses will always be those which are necessary or advantageous to the existence of society. For it is a common experience that the moral intuitions which lead to conduct that has ceased to serve a purpose, and the internal sanctions which follow disregard of them, are often even more powerful than those which protect such virtues as justice and veracity’ (Sorley 1904, 176).

Putting the issue of ‘existence of society’ firmly to one side, and placing ‘justice and veracity’ mainly in our focus, it must be observed that the test of time has been less kind to Sorley as a moral and political thinker than it has to the plausibility or otherwise of his epistemological response to the evolutionary debunking challenge. Indeed, it is possible to wonder if, as a matter of fact there is an interesting connection between the two; insofar as the endorsement of a reflective equilibrium approach to moral epistemology (even if qualified as ‘wide’) has sometimes been thought to bring in its wake a tendency to moral and political conservatism.<sup>22</sup> To document this alleged tendency, it is tempting to cite

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<sup>22</sup> The symptoms of this tendency towards conservatism are arguably present in the following passage from Pollock (1876): ‘On the Evolution-hypothesis there is a presumption in favor of existing moral rules; and I may add that in a civilized and free community like our own that presumption is exceedingly strong’ (343).

the following example from Sorley's biography as a potential warning shot for anyone disposed to forget the extent to which even the widest reflective equilibrium is bound to be firmly embedded in the context of the particular social and historical milieu that gives rise to it.

It is a curious irony that Sorley's immediate predecessor as Knightbridge Professor, Henry Sidgwick, was also one of the most prominent champions of women's education at the University; having been one of the key figures in the establishment of Newnham College (the second college at Cambridge for women). For one of Sorley's lasting claims to political fame is his fervent opposition to the admission of women to take Cambridge University degrees. In this respect, Sorley's accession to high office was not exactly a progressive move on the part of the Electors.<sup>23</sup> In his public campaign to prevent the admission of women to take a University degree, Sorley argued that women wanting to enter the University were not seeking equality but power, and that their admission would inevitably damage University life (McWilliams Tullberg 1975). What Sorley proposed was that women be excluded, not from a university education as such, but from a university education within the domain of Cambridge's collegiate university, their presence in which was predicted to ruin the men's education and lower academic standards. Instead, Sorley favored the establishment of a separate university for women outside the city, and thus at some remove from the ancient university and its all-male colleges. In response to the claim that women were already *de facto* admitted to the University in virtue

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<sup>23</sup> In his obituary of Sidgwick, Sorley writes kindly of his predecessor in this respect, although without venturing any views of his own on the matter (Sorley 1901, 170).

of having gained admission to medical examinations, Sorley and his ally in the cause, William Ridgeway (1858-1926), argued that this had to be regarded as a special exception in virtue of the fact that during the Great War there was a need to recruit and train women as 'a war emergency measure'.<sup>24</sup> In other words: a classic example of divisive university politics, regarded with bewilderment and scorn by many people outside the institution at the time, and even more so by members of increasingly unsympathetic future generations both inside and outside the university. Yet in the heat of the moment, Sorley and his conservative allies actually won; twice overseeing the defeat of a vote to change the University regulations, and thereby ensuring the exclusion of women from taking Cambridge degrees until after the end of another world war (in 1947), by which time Sorley's ashes had been resting in King's College Chapel for over a decade.<sup>25</sup>

There is no simple logical connection between a philosopher's moral epistemology and her or his particular moral and political commitments. And as far as I am aware, Sorley never said there was. It is a sobering thought, however, to observe the ease with which a rational spirit of theoretical moderation can be combined with a practical spirit of intransigent reaction, and how poorly the ethos of measured institutional conservatism has often stood the test of time. That there is nothing inevitable about this contrast is demonstrated by the fact that some of Sorley's better known Idealist contemporaries made proactive use of evolutionarily informed criticism to develop a political philosophy that

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<sup>24</sup> Ridgeway further argued that women would have an unfair advantage over men in that they would be able to use their female charms to manipulate their examiners (all of whom he may, or may not, have assumed to be male).

<sup>25</sup> A parallel move to admit women to Oxford met with less formidable resistance, ensuring their right to take University degrees in 1920.

combined the consequentialist structure of classical utilitarianism with a perfectionist idea of self-realization in support of a progressive socialist agenda in which the equal rights of women had a central place (see e.g. Ritchie 1889, 62-75; Tyler 2012, 270ff; c.f. Freden 1976; 1978; Weinstein 2007). If Sorley and some of his contemporaries ended up having ‘missed the boat’ in this regard, the explanation is possibly more a matter of historical contingency and personal idiosyncrasy than a matter of theoretical consistency or rational principle.<sup>26</sup> Rather than a function of their moral epistemology, therefore, it might be a reminder of what another Knightbridge Professor at the other end of the Twentieth Century would call ‘the limits of philosophy’ (see e.g. Williams 1985).<sup>27</sup>

Very few people today will know much, if anything, about the philosophy professor whose remains were laid to rest in King’s College Chapel in 1935. And

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<sup>26</sup> The influence of Sorley’s religious associations and theological beliefs are arguably a significant factor on this matter, but space does not permit the pursuit of this issue here.

<sup>27</sup> Another illustration of Sorley’s political conservatism, but one that for tragic reasons is less helpful for present purposes, is provided by Sorley’s attitude to the Great War, in which he lost his son Charles (1895-1915), who was shot by a German sniper and has subsequently come to be regarded as one of the great poets of his generation. Sorley the elder’s attitude to the War is documented in a spat he had with Bertrand Russell in *The Cambridge Review* in 1914. (In a letter to Ottoline Morrell, Russell describes Sorley as one of ‘the old fogies’ (Monk 1996, 396)). In response to the prospect of war, Russell advocated the establishment of a neutral, international, peace-keeping force. Sorley was against the idea. When it was later proposed that King’s should commemorate the dead Austro-Hungarian alumnus Ferenc Békássy along with Sorley the younger and other British fallen in the Chapel, Sorley objected until a compromise was negotiated by Keynes, whereby Békássy’s name would appear (as it now does) on a different part of the Chapel wall. (The Austrian Wittgenstein is said to have complained to O.K. Bouwsma about Sorley’s attitude at the time.) I am grateful to Peter Jones for bringing these biographical details to my attention. (See Jones 2016.)

literally thousands of people will have walked past the sundial dedicated to his memory on their way to Chapel from the Porter's Lodge since then without having had the faintest idea about its progeny. In any case, the initials engraved on the stone are on the back, facing the Chapel walls, so you would only ever get to see them even today if you are one of the selected few who are allowed to walk on the grass.<sup>28</sup>

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