

# THE PERSONALIST ETHICS OF W.R. SORLEY

R.T. Allen

William Ritchie Sorley (1855-1935), Knightsbridge Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge (1900-33), was primarily a moral philosopher who was among the first to tackle business ethics, and also wrote on political philosophy, and in his *Moral Values and the Idea of God*<sup>1</sup> (the Gifford Lectures, 1913-15), presented outlines and some more substantive parts not only of his ethics and philosophical theism but also of metaphysics generally and epistemology.

His ethics is a fully personalist one, centred upon the person and his value, not only in content but also in method. The latter is equally important, because he is not engaged in the construction of some abstract scheme based on some seemingly simple and 'given' goal or law, as in Utilitarianism along with all consequentialisms, or Kant and any other supposedly comprehensive systems of laws, but looks to the actual moral experience of real persons and thus its history, developments and refinements, and seeks to articulate its inner logic and presuppositions, just as all philosophy should do, and as Sorley always did. He did not say the last word, but he worked on the right lines and with commendable results. Also, as far as I know, Sorley is the first British philosopher to begin to examine the nature and types of moral value in the context of an outline of values in general. Before then philosophers and theologians had used the doubly ambiguous noun 'good', as in 'my good' or 'the good for man', which can mean (1a), what is *valuable* for me or all humanity or, (1b), 'objective, end, goal or purpose', which, is taken to mean *good for*, might be very different from (1a); and (2) it also does not distinguish between values and the bearers of value, especially in the plural, so that 'goods' can mean different *types* of good of (1) such moral, aesthetic, scientific or technical, and also *things* which are good in one way or another. Sorley does not explicitly draw these distinctions but he has made an important break with 'good' as a noun, and thus uses 'values' and 'bearers of value' instead of it (see, for instance MVIG, pp. 116-7).

Sorley's personalism is shown also in the rest of his philosophy, in which he breaks with the domination of epistemology in distinctively modern philosophy:

'The problem of knowledge has been too much with us, and has tended sometimes to obscure our view of the realities which knowledge can reveal. We are occupied with the conditions which make it possible for a subject to cognise an object, and we come to think of the self as a mere subject of knowledge even as a sort of spectator set behind a window, upon whom images of things impinge through the glass . . . . But it is not thus that the self is either experienced or known. It is never the mere subject of knowledge, but always active and acted upon, a participant in the course of reality, creative and created, fashioned by the force of circumstance, moulding things as it works its way through them, and feeling in its own life every emotion of the adventure. Not only have selves windows, therefore ; we may say that they have doors, through which they go out and in, in daily commerce with the things of nature. There is no such thing as a pure ego: it is simply an abstract conception of the centre of experience; and the centre is perpetually gathering new experience which expands the circumference. In perception, idea and science, as well as in emotion, desire and volition, it does not merely mirror the world; it adds also to its own life, and gives fulness and precision to the ego of experience'. (MVIG, pp. 220-1).

The whole person also matters in ethics, as we shall see. Also noteworthy in this context is the opening chapter of the same volume wherein he argues for the priority of experience in ethics as elsewhere (see also Ch. VI), and against that of merely metaphysical concepts and Hegel's dialectic, both of which invalidly derive value and obligation from what is wholly non-moral. Indeed, in Chap. II. 'Values', he argues that valuation precedes cognition: we seek to know what we value for practical purposes and that the valuing of knowledge *per se* is a late development of this. Human activity is a part of reality and therefore moral experience must be taken into account in metaphysics. Thus, we may add, the last also has a personal dimension.

Sorley wrote three principal books on moral philosophy, which I shall take in turn. In *The Ethics of Naturalism* he divided 19th C. philosophies into a 'naturalist' stream, which he reckoned to have replaced the 'materialist' one, and a group of 'idealist' streams (in a wider use of 'idealism', common at the time), the former taking the concepts categories of physical science to apply to all reality, and the latter denying this, whether or not it also denies the reality of the physical world ('idealism' in the narrow sense). Also in that book, he exposed some basic errors in the Utilitarians' hedonist axiology, notably its attempts to move from attending only to one's own pleasure to attending also to that of others, and showed that axiological

hedonism, that pleasure is the only value, and psychological hedonism, that pleasure is the only aim of human effort, entail each other, and in effect, that if pleasure were the only value it would not be a value because we could not take pleasure in something because it is good.

His own positive ethics is to be found in *The Moral Life and Moral Worth* and *Moral Values and the Idea of God*. The former presents an ethics of character and virtues, with some particularly interesting features, as in the following passage which contains several important points: the person as the real subject of ethics and basis of moral values; the emerging differentiation of morality from custom and law; its 'internal' character in having to be personally appropriated; its effects on the whole of life; and also shows Sorley's attention to history:

'Morality is internal ; it belongs to the inner life. And this is the mark which distinguishes it from the law of the land and the conventions of society. These affect a man from without, direct or limit his activity, and prescribe its sphere. Their operation is external; and they do not touch him at every point: beyond the range of the actions which they require or forbid there are wide tracts of conduct to which the laws are indifferent or which they are unable to cover. Further, they take account only of things done. There is an inner circle of personal life which a man claims as his own, and into which neither positive law nor social rule is able to penetrate. Morality is not limited in this way. It rests on a consciousness of the difference between good and evil; this consciousness influences the springs of action in a man's own nature; it works from within outwards, and is capable of affecting every part of his life' (MLMW, pp. 8-9).

Few philosophers have ever faced the question of whether morality applies to the whole of life or just a part. 'Act utilitarianism' would make life an endless striving to realise whatever it holds to be of value or the objective of human life, while any ethics solely of laws and imperatives, and thus of duties and prohibitions, either requires more and more specific laws for all of life, like the Pharisees, or more likely, has some specific duties, a greater number of specific prohibitions, and leaves the rest to choice without moral considerations. In contrast, ethics of values has, or should have, the notion of a morally licit that is not simply morally neutral or indifferent, but has real value as good or right but is not in and by itself compulsory. Also, an ethics of virtues and character, to which Sorley turns, includes the readiness of them to be shown at any time, as when at a party, by helping someone who falls ill or suffers an injury or by not joining in malicious gossip.

Character, Sorley continues, is what we are born with, the result of experience and, above all, what we do with ourselves. It follows that morality is a matter of volition, choice and action upon it, and hence of virtues. But here Sorley, contrary to the vicious dichotomising of much contemporary Analytic philosophy, is aware that most, if not all, generally valuable traits of character, can be put to trivial and really evil causes, and thus require an end, a set of values or valuable objectives, i.e. an axiology, to and by which they should be directed.

'In true temperance the impulses are controlled by the conception of an end worthy of a man's desire; in true courage it is in pursuit of a high purpose that pain and danger are readily faced. The purpose or end, which, in this way, is involved in all virtuous character, cannot be formed without reason. Virtue—if we take the term to include all the characteristics which we call virtuous—is nothing less than the realisation of goodness in human character ; and it implies some idea—though not necessarily a complete, or even a clear, idea—of the good to be realised. This is the element of truth in the Socratic paradox that virtue is knowledge'. (MLMW, pp. 20-1.)

Against 'essential asceticism' as distinct from a temporary discipline, and 'reformism' or 'altruism' as the sole meaning and scope of morality, though not in those explicit terms, Sorley rightly says, 'It is the moralisation not the annihilation of ambition and desire that is demanded, the finding of one's true self in others' good as well as one's own, and the bringing of one's sensuous nature into harmony with the realisation of a rational personality', (MLMW, p. 22). The one primary object of morality is therefore the moralisation of the whole self, and not just an isolated 'will' as for Kant, or an ability to calculate consequences or outward obedience to laws. Implicit in this is Augustine's idea of the 'ordo amoris', 'the order of loves', as what we fundamentally are and should become, an idea taken up by Pascal and in our own time by Max Scheler,<sup>2</sup> but first formulated by Plato in Books 4 and 9 of the *Republic*. The whole of the person is a fundamental value and goal, and so is his own fulfilment with and in that of other persons. This is implicitly bringing us near to a conception of personal fulfilment as both what we ought to be and what would satisfy us. Hence Sorley continues by distinguishing 'personal' virtues, primarily temperance, courage and wisdom, and 'social' virtues, primarily justice and benevolence, which necessarily have importance with regard to each other:

'We may therefore define the Personal virtues as those excellences of character which exhibit the due ordering and regulation of the lower by the higher nature, and the culture or development of this harmonious personality. Social Virtues, on the other hand, are those excellences of personal character which exhibit the individual in harmonious relation with other persons—respecting their rights and promoting the common welfare. And the two classes are interdependent: without the personal virtues social good is not likely to be rightly striven after; without the social virtues, the personal character is a monstrosity—seeking individual good in isolation from the community to which all qualities are due and in which all good must be realised'. (MLMW pp. 23-4).

He also discerned a third group of virtues,

'connected with our attitude not merely to personal and social ends, but to human life as a whole and its final meaning. These are apt to elude exact definition; for the object which determines their scope is not one object amongst others presented in experience. Yet it is this attitude which gives completeness to human character; and room must be found, under a third division, for virtues corresponding to what have been called Theological Virtues' (MLMW p. 24),

or religious ones as Sorley himself calls them, though perhaps 'cosmological' would be better as more comprehensive of the many world-and-life-views. I must pass over the intermediate chapters on the personal and social virtues and merely state that the final chapter, on 'Religion and the Moral Life' does not really answer the initial question of the need for a unifying end, a supreme virtue that differentiates itself into specific virtues, likewise a supreme value differentiating itself into specific values, and how these two are ultimately one, which he left to *Moral Values and the Idea of God*. But at least Sorley does raise here the fundamental question of what human life, and morality with it, is really *for*, one which, as far as I know, Analytic philosophy totally ignores.

Sorley's longest and finest book is *Moral Values and the Idea of God*. In Chapters II-IV he develops a general and a moral axiology, and defends the objectivity of the latter, within the outlines of an epistemology and metaphysics which give due prominence to our necessary personal involvement. In particular Sorley shows that values are essentially related to concrete reality and not abstract notions: as merely thought of, nothing is of value, but has value only as actually or assumed to be real. Nevertheless, universals are as necessary in a formal axiology as they are in a natural science.

In Chapter V he then relates value to personality. While in the natural sciences it is the universal features of things that matter, and thus value does not enter as a subject for study, in the human and thus historical sciences it is the individual person or group of persons that is the object of study, and with them the values that guide them.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in human life individuality is itself of value and mere repetition of little or no value, as in the prospect of reliving one's life over again without any change. Even more so, persons feel devalued when regarded as just like someone else and, worse, as just the same as some others. Value 'attaches itself to uniqueness only because it is the individual that exists and the individual is unique' (MVI, p. 116).<sup>4</sup>

What, then, are the bearers of value? Here he explicitly sets aside the intermediate zones of subpersonal life and focuses on the 'extremes' of the merely physical and the personal. Yet he also recognises that things can have similar values for animals although they are not explicitly aware of this. The physical realm has value only in relation to our purposes and thus is instrumental to them, although he admits difficulties over the beauty of natural objects. For, when all reference to a mind as producing them, is excluded, they *would* have aesthetic value only *if* they were works of a mind, and so their colours and forms would be only conditions for value. And the same applies to all judgments of value and disvalue upon the natural world, both as a whole and the particular things with in it. Moral predicates are applicable only when it and they are not seen as merely physical, living or animate, but as personal or the work of persons. And so all values are ultimately those of or related to persons (MVI, pp. 117-26).<sup>5</sup>

This leads Sorley to affirm that each race, period and generation, and each stage and moment in the individual's life has or may have its own 'intrinsic' value, and is never a means to the next, as opposed, we may add, to all 'immanentisations of the eschaton' as in Hegel, Marxism and all Utopianisms, which do make every previous age merely a means to the realisation of the final and perfect age. Indeed, continues Sorley, the category of means and end is inapplicable to personal existence. And thus the value and meaning of a particular moment of an individual's life depend upon his purpose. In turn, that is necessarily connected to others in a yet larger whole, not just instrumentally as cause and effect, but organically or systematically, of which institutions and communities are expressions, though all are fragmentary and imperfect. Persons are the real bearers of value, but no persons exist apart from living, or having lived, with others. And so each social grouping and the inclusive one, such as the modern state, has, in a sense, its own purposes, value,

duties and rights, guided by its own ideals, and thus has the status of personality and its own moral value in the realisation of values that cannot be achieved by individuals separately. Yet it is not a distinct mind and is constituted primarily by the moral unity of its members rather than their psychical unity (MVIC, pp. 127-32).

Sorley is therefore what some would call a 'communitarian' personalist, but, as sometimes happens, if 'communitarian' is taken as the converse of 'individualist', and especially if all the talk is of '*the community*', we are straight back to the old collectivism and indeed totalitarianism, even if its supposed to be 'democratic'. 'Interpersonal' is a better term.

The social whole leads, via a treatment of 'relative and absolute value' in Chap. VI in which Sorley correctly distinguishes the necessary relevance to the person of, and participation of the person in making, judgments of value from their alleged lack objective reference because of that relevance and participation, to the question of the absolute value, or genuine whole of value, in which the specific values are interrelated and mutually adjusting, and thus 'organic' parts and not 'mechanical' ones, which, as by Bentham, can simply be added to or subtracted from, each other.

'Our first confident assertion of moral right or wrong has been found to lead beyond the immediate experience in order that its significance may be understood and its validity assured. The value of the particular case is determined by its conditions and its issues ; we cannot trust to the mere momentary appreciation as it stands, or may be supposed to stand, alone. When we passed from the particular to the universal, the absolute still eluded us. The axioms and abstract theorems of formal ethics owe their significance to their application to concrete realities. These are parts of the connected structure of reality as a whole; and the values of any portion of this whole may be affected by the relations in which it stands to other portions. Thus, in a system of ethics, our goal would be a whole in which all values are included; and, if this goal is called an absolute, it cannot be related in any external way to the absolute which has been sought along other lines of research. There cannot be two absolutes, one of which, and one of which only, is ethical. We can form a conception of an absolute only as an individual reality which contains harmoniously within itself both the actual order and the moral order' (MVIC, p. 159).

The ensuing chapters on 'The Conservation of Value', 'Value and Reality', 'The Division of Reality' and 'The Unity of Reality' fill out the ways in which value and reality are necessarily linked, especially by personal existence and activity, the nature of which is also further developed. They provide the basis for the second part of the book in which Sorley, having examined other arguments for classical theism, then examines other world-and-life-views, finds them metaphysically and morally at fault, and outlines his own argument for philosophical theism based on his personalist ethics, which we cannot examine here and now.<sup>6</sup>

But two central questions about persons and moral value remain incompletely answered.

First, he clearly states that the thoroughly moralised person is both what he ought to be and what will truly fulfil him, and thus unites the realisation of the specifically or narrowly moral values with that of the wider ones or morally relevant ones, as here, even though, as we have seen, he also regards the latter as merely instrumental to, and not as ingredient in, the full realisation of personality:

'As free and rational, persons are also purposeful, seekers of ends. The law which the person recognises as valid for his life is that which tends to the end in which personality is conceived as reaching its true good. This is an ideal, and its attainment must be looked for in the gradual process by which character is built up and conduct brought into rational order. The moral agent is thus compelled to regard his true personality as consisting not in the actual features of the passing moment but in an *is to be*—in something to which he should attain and to which he can at least approximate. This ideal self is conceived as in harmony with the moral values which he recognises, and it is at the same time regarded as the complete realisation of that personality which, throughout life, is always in process of growth.' (MVIC, p.191).

Yet to some extent Sorley does not draw the full conclusion from his own argument. As noted above, he takes the unity of values to be one of a whole of parts, albeit an 'organic' and not 'mechanical one', and in this passage from the final chapter he still regards the wider group as independent of the narrower one:

'The content of the moral ideal was not found to be an easy thing to define. A final definition, indeed, is not possible, for knowledge of the moral ideal grows in clearness and fulness as character approximates to it. As we have seen, it can be expressed best as a spirit or tendency in which the higher human capacities and the harmony of man with man triumph over sensual and selfish impulses. This is the characteristic of the good will, that it is guided by the highest and by the spirit of unity with others. But what the higher interests and capacities of man are this question may seem to have received a less distinct answer. Indeed, an answer cannot be given without

reference to the other values of knowledge and beauty, for instance which we recognise as having a superior claim to that of the demands of comfortable living or the satisfaction of appetite and impulse. In the widest sense of the word, therefore, ethics might be used to signify the whole realm of values, while morality proper is restricted to the virtuous attitude towards them. Morality includes the will to these values, but the values themselves and their worth are independent' (MVG, p. 518).

Second, as already observed, he does not fully or explicitly grasp the real and *essential* uniqueness of the person which makes us irreplaceable, and is the basis of justice. For the ultimate value of the person lies not in his moral character, as might be supposed, however good that may be. Even the hardened and thoroughly malicious criminal retains some rights, as to a fair trial. Why? Because he is a radically unique person. In purely functional respects, one person can be rightly replaced by another, as when persons incompetent at a given task are removed and others appointed, but as unique value-essences none of us can be replaced.

In summary, this brief sampling is very inadequate, but I hope it is enough to show that, *sans la lettre*, Sorley was a thorough personalist in his ethics and also to suggest the same in his epistemology and metaphysics. His work is incomplete and at times did not fully overcome subpersonal categories and conceptions. But no one can say everything, let alone at the same time. He moved ethics on from the stale dichotomy of Utilitarianism and its hedonism versus Kantian will and laws, still too much with us, by looking to experience, the person and personal life, and the new axiology of value. Unfortunately, the later dominance of the anti-philosophies of Logical Positivism and then Linguistic or Conceptual Analysis, wrote him and similar philosophers of his time out of the history books, insofar as they paid any attention to the history of philosophy which was, for them, a mere catalogue of errors, and which still has its effects today. Yet much could be learned by reading him and continuing on the paths which he opened up.

Notes:

1. Cambridge, C.U.P., 1918, 3rd ed. 1935: hereafter 'MVG'. I shall also refer to *The Ethics of Naturalism*, William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh and London, 1885, and *The Moral Life and Moral Worth*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1911, hereafter 'MLMW'.
2. See 'Ordo Amoris' in *Max Scheler: Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. D.R. Lacterman, Evanston, IL., Northwestern University Press, 1973.
3. Although he wrote on economics and ethics, he has forgotten that economics is the one abstract science of distinctively human life, although sociology has tried to be, and applied economics deals with individual economies, events, periods, and groups, while, conversely, the natural sciences of geology and physical geology also map the actual formations of the earth's surface and subsurfaces.
4. Here Sorley does not distinguish between 'accidental' and 'essential' uniqueness. The former is that of mass production. Any quality that distinguishes one teaspoon of the same size and design from another is purely 'accidental', in both the popular and philosophical meanings of the word, and just the same discoloration, chip or dent could happen to another one, whereas that of persons is 'essential', a radical uniqueness that is irreplaceable. Though philosophers such as Strawson have explicitly denied it (*Entity and Identity and Other Essays*, Oxford, O.U.P., 1997, pp. 3-4), and persist in thinking in sub-personal categories or the wholly abstract ones of formal logic, the poets and writers of popular songs know better: 'Only you' is their constant theme, or in Shakespeare's *Sonnet 84*:  

'Who is it that says most? which can say more  
Than this rich praise,—that you alone are you?'
5. Sorley has hit on the truth that aesthetic, and other values, are such only for an intelligence that can recognise and attend to and dwell on them, but has not fully articulated it here. The natural object seen or heard has the potentiality for this which is thereby actualised. Therefore the work of a mind, is that actualisation which comes after and not before the existence of the natural object, in what we do, usually tacitly, when attending *to* natural objects and by selecting and more fully noticing their features, which is itself an incipient work of art, and whose meaning an artist proper then proceeds fully to express in an articulate form such as poem, painting or piece of music.  
But Sorley is hampered here by still taking to be exhaustive the ancient distinction between 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' values, whereas aesthetic ones, plus also those of friendship, are 'ingredient' and are the very qualities of the objects in and for themselves, and colour and mould our experiences and are not distinct and separate events which 'cause' them. (See also, MVG, p. 166, where 'intrinsic' values such as truth and beauty, are said to be found also to have 'instrumental value' in enhancing personal worth, but they are really 'ingredients' in it.) Conversely, the notion of

‘intrinsic value’ suggests G.E. Moore’s and the ‘intuitionists’ somewhat naive view that we simply bring to mind, look or hear and thus grasp such values. But in fact we do so within the usually tacit framework of a specific activity such as those which are aesthetic, scientific, interpersonal, or the proper exercise of our self-responsibility, and of the standards which the relevant activity sets both for its performance and its appreciation. See further *The Structure of Value*, especially Chaps. 3-6.

6. In aim, outline and content it largely overlaps with A.E. Taylor’s great work, *The Faith of A Moralist* (2 vols., London, Macmillan, 1930; 2nd ed. 1951, one-volume; also Gifford Lectures, 1926-8), especially Vol. I, ‘The Theological Implications of Morality’. But whereas Sorley sets out his ethical and metaphysical principles at length in the first part, and then applies them in the second, Taylor takes his, similarly personalist principles, mostly for granted and applies them in far more detail in both volumes. Together they make an impressive treatment of the whole subject. See <http://www.britishpersonalistforum.org.uk/british%20personalism.pdf>