Faulkner's Ethics

An Intense Struggle

Michael Wainwright

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"Michael Wainwright's reassessment of William Faulkner's major works in relation to the ethics of Henry Sidgwick and Jacques Derrida—with support from game theory and psychoanalysis—is original, perceptive, and timely. Wainwright provocatively refigures Faulkner's corpus in the light of these hitherto disparate philosophical trajectories, and in doing so acquaints the philosophers with one another in ways which are lucid and suggestive. *Faulkner's Ethics: An Intense Struggle* represents a serious challenge to extant Faulkner scholarship."

—Niall Gildea, Author of *Jacques Derrida's Cambridge Affair: Deconstruction, Philosophy and Institutionality (2019)*

"Early Faulkner criticism often followed the trajectory of Faulkner's life, sometimes simply assuming that life had a moral compass. Later schools, for example historical materialism, sought the 'substratum' of material reality that underpinned the narrative, again only assuming that issues, such as the nature and economics of labor, had moral implications. Psychology, anthropology, mythology—all have had their day, often very useful days, often touching on ethical issues—but what has been lacking is ethics itself. Michael Wainwright's *Faulkner's Ethics: An Intense Struggle* will end that neglect and, I believe, spur a new interest in moral struggle, moral direction as it can be found in Faulkner's life and literature."

—Charles A. Peek, *Professor Emeritus, Department of English, University of Nebraska Kearney*

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For
Steve and Julie
The innermost good of their seeking
Might come in the simplest of speech

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Innermost Good

Experience has frequently shown […] how light may be shed on one part of the field of knowledge from another apparently remote.
—Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (401)

On 23 March 1962, Simon Claxton interviewed the American author William Faulkner (b. 1897) at the Nobel laureate's home in Oxford, Mississippi. Asked about his "objective in writing," Faulkner's response was disarming. "I'm telling a story, introducing comic and tragic elements as I like. I'm telling a story—to be repeated and retold." The postscript to this unassuming statement, however, embraced a further objective: these elemental introductions "illustrate Man in his dilemma—facing his environment" (277). Faulkner's unexpected death less than four months after this interview—he suffered a fatal coronary occlusion on 6 July—has made this postscript canonical, reconfirming as it does the summary Judith Sutpen effectively offers of the author's creative project in what is widely regarded as Faulkner's greatest single achievement, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936):

> You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on

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> the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug. (105)

The interconnectedness of which Judith speaks amounts to the problematics of coordination; the attendant dilemmas encapsulate the conflicting demands of egoism and universalism; and this encapsulation belongs to the academic domain of utilitarian philosophy. "Since the middle of the eighteenth century," relates John Rawls, "the dominant systematic moral doctrine in the English-speaking tradition of moral philosophy has been some form of utilitarianism" (v). Within the historical context in which Faulkner sets Judith Sutpen's life—she was born in 1841 and dies in 1884—the leading exponent of this doctrine was Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900), the English utilitarian and economist, who would eventually accede to the post of Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Cambridge in 1883. Some one hundred years earlier, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) had founded modern utilitarianism, extrapolating its principles from the thoughts of his predecessors, especially those of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), David Hume (1711–76), and Adam Smith (1723–90), precepts that Sidgwick, initially under the influence of John Stuart Mill (1806–73), was to make so intelligible in *The Methods of Ethics* (1874).

Sidgwick's magnum opus, states Jerome B. Schneewind, "is an acknowledged masterpiece of moral philosophy" (vii), earning this status for offering, as Rawls asserts, "the clearest and most accessible formulation of what we may call 'the classical utilitarian doctrine.'" This guiding principle "holds that the ultimate moral end of social and individual action is the greatest net sum of the happiness of all sentient beings" (v). In forwarding this doctrine, Sidgwick consistently confronts the resulting difficulties, dealing with these issues in an open manner that is at once consistent and thorough. "Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*," as Marcus G. Singer chronicles, "was regarded as important on first publication, as is shown by the great amount of discussion, criticism, and controversy it engendered." That significance was "also shown, no doubt, by the fact that it underwent five revisions, for a total of six editions, in the author's lifetime" (421).

Despite his devotion to *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick made time for other projects, and "by modern standards," as Schneewind notes, "his writings are extremely varied" (15). The most notable of these publications are *The Principles of Political Economy* (1883), *Outlines of the History of Ethics* (1886), and *The Elements of Politics* (1891). *The Methods of*

Ethics, however, remains his masterpiece. Commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Sidgwick's death, the then Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy C. D. Broad thought *The Methods of Ethics* "to be on the whole the best treatise on moral theory that has ever been written" (143). Another three decades later, Brand Blanshard explicitly agreed with Broad's opinion, adding that "for combined subtleness, thoroughness, lucidity, and fairness, I know of no equal to it in ethical literature" (90). Indeed, *The Methods of Ethics* would remain the leading examination of utilitarian principles until the appearance of Derek Parfit's (1942–2017) *Reasons and Persons* in 1984, and its contribution to progressivism in western thought—what James T. Kloppenberg calls the role of "Sidgwick's ideas in the context of that more general transformation of American and European philosophy and political theory" ("Rethinking Tradition" [1992] 369) between the 1870s and the 1920s—must not be underestimated.

As in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, "social democratic theory in the United States" emerged during this period, as Kloppenberg traces, "from a background of ethical reformism rather than revolutionary political action" (*Uncertain Victory* [1986] 206). Hence, while admired in Britain for "his role in the reformulation of utilitarianism," that role "also played an important part in a broader transatlantic community of discourse" ("Rethinking Tradition" 369), and Sidgwick's American confrères fêted him. William James knew Sidgwick both as a philosopher and as a member of the Society for Psychical Research. Deeply moved by Sidgwick's death, James wrote to his widow, Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick (née Balfour). "Dear Mrs. Sidgwick, you have no idea how many of us mourn with you in this bereavement or what an impression of flawlessness in quality your husband left by his person on all those who knew him, and by his writings on those who never saw him." Her husband was "a spotless man, a wise man, a heroic man" (qtd. in Deborah Blum, *Ghost Hunters* 250). For his part, while reviewing *Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir* (1906), a reminiscence coauthored by Eleanor and Henry's brother Arthur, John Dewey notes how Sidgwick "combined the scientific, inductive and empirical interest with great personal sensitiveness to ideal and spiritual aspirations." Sidgwick "found himself to the last unable satisfactorily to reconcile the two tendencies," adjudges Dewey, but he "remains a monument to all that is best in" the moral tradition established by his utilitarian forebears, a tradition of "simplicity, openmindedness, absolute fairness and sincerity" (244).

Both James and Dewey were drawn to what Kloppenberg calls "Sidgwick's incisive criticism of prevailing options available in late-nineteenth-century thought: idealism and positivism in epistemology, Kantian intuitionism and Benthamite utilitarianism in ethics, and revolutionary socialism and laissez-faire liberalism in political theory" ("Rethinking Tradition" 369), and the resonances (and occasional discords) between Sidgwick, James, and Dewey cannot help but emphasize Sidgwick's transatlantic significance. On the one hand, this emphasis reveals Sidgwick's critical importance to the development of pragmatism and aligns him with the Father of American Pragmatism, his contemporary Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). The main body of Peirce's work, however, was not published in his lifetime, nor was that corpus immediately and widely disseminated thereafter; only by degrees, and finally with the attention of admirers such as Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), has Peirce's philosophy gained importance for its prescience. On the other hand, most importantly, and in the context of Faulkner studies, this emphasis reveals Sidgwick's general influence on the scholarly mind, an epistemological contribution that literary academics have tended to overlook. One of the aims of *Faulkner's Ethics: An Intense Struggle* is to redress this neglect. For, as Rawls notes, *The Methods of Ethics* "is the first truly academic work in moral philosophy which undertakes to provide a systematic comparative study of moral conceptions, starting with those which historically *and by present assessment* are the most significant" (v; emphasis added).

"The Good investigated in Ethics," opines Sidgwick in the seventh, final, and definitive edition of *The Methods of Ethics* (1907), "is limited to Good in some degree attainable by human effort; accordingly knowledge of the end is sought in order to ascertain what actions are the right means to its attainment. Thus however prominent the notion of an Ultimate Good—other than voluntary action of any kind—may be in an ethical system, and whatever interpretation may be given to this notion, we must still arrive finally, if it is to be practically useful, at some determination of precepts or directive rules of conduct" (3).[1] Sidgwick defines ethics, therefore, "as the science or study of what is right or what ought to be, so far as this depends upon the voluntary action of individuals" (4). This ostensibly straightforward definition actually necessitates some unpacking: the individual is an agent; such an agent is neither a derivative of nor naturally substituted by anyone else; the practical deliberations of an agent are first-personal, and the agent is responsible for that agent's deliberate actions.

Moreover, "in opposition to [Immanuel] Kant," as Schneewind notes, "Sidgwick holds that the sense of 'freedom' which concerns the libertarian is" that "in which a man may be just as free when he acts wrongly or irrationally as he is when he acts rightly or rationally." Sidgwick maintains this view "to preserve the connection between freedom and responsibility" (208). For Sidgwick, as Schneewind concludes, "the important aspects of morality are those concerned with decisions about what is to be done, and that retrospective judgements, those essential to feelings of remorse and guilt and to assessments of responsibility, merit, and blameworthiness, are of little moment except in so far as they are logically tied to some set of prospective judgements" (211–12). Unavoidably, environmental considerations cast the remit of agential responsibility, as Faulkner's comparable understanding suggests in the light of Judith Sutpen's hitched strings in *Absalom*, beyond the individual agent. Responsibility for voluntary acts must answer to *reasonable self-love*. "It has been widely held by even orthodox moralists," as Sidgwick avers, "that all morality rests ultimately on the basis of 'reasonable self-love'; *i.e.* that its rules are ultimately binding on any individual only so far as it is his interest on the whole to observe them" (*Methods* 7).

Not every moral deliberation results in an obligation. "Some moral conclusions merely announce that you *may* do something," as Bernard Williams (1929–2003), one of Sidgwick's latter-day successors as Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy, explains in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). "Those do not express an obligation, but they are in a sense still governed by the idea of obligation: you ask whether you are under an obligation, and decide that you are not." Other moral deliberations, however, do result in obligations. In these cases, "an obligation applies to someone with respect to an action—it is an obligation to do something—and the action must be in the agent's power." The formula "*ought* implies *can*" is well known in this association (175; emphasis original). "I cannot conceive that I 'ought' to do anything," reasons Sidgwick, "which at the same time I judge that I cannot do" (*Methods* 33), and although "as a general statement about *ought* it is untrue," as Williams notes, Sidgwick's proposition "must be correct if it is taken as a condition on what can be a particular obligation, where that is practically concluded" (175; emphasis original). Any deliberation that proposes an impracticable act has failed in its objective; the process of deliberation must be reanimated; and this cycle must be repeated until it posits a practicable act. Moral obligation results in practicable acts that are virtuous or dutiful, and

"the terms 'ought,' 'right,' and 'duty,'" as Schneewind concludes, "are used primarily in connection with the demands of reason on action" (222).

Reasonable self-love demands what Sidgwick in *The Methods of Ethics* calls "Prudence" (7); this virtue appreciates universalistic demands; as a result, prudence is an important aspect of goodness in general. Nonetheless, "common moral opinion recognises and inculcates other fundamental rules," including "those of Justice, Good Faith, [and] Veracity." Although these four duties coincidence to some degree with the cardinal virtues of Christianity—those of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage—to the rational mind, all reasonable principles "are only valid so far as their observance is conducive to the general happiness" (8). Sidgwick, despite his religious skepticism, hereby retains his regard for a "Common Sense morality" (243) strongly informed by Christian principles. "As Mill has urged," notes Sidgwick, "in so far as Utilitarianism is more rigorous than Common Sense in exacting the sacrifice of the individual's happiness to that of mankind generally, it is strictly in accordance with the most characteristic teaching of Christianity" (504). Although "Common Sense does not regard moral rules as being *merely* the mandates of an Omnipotent Being who will reward and punish men according as they obey or violate them," continues Sidgwick, "it certainly holds that this is a true though partial view of them, and perhaps that it may be intuitively apprehended. If then reflection leads us to conclude that the particular moral principles of Common Sense are to be systematised as subordinate to that pre-eminently certain and irrefragable intuition which stands as the first principle of Utilitarianism; then, of course, it will be the Utilitarian Code to which we shall believe the Divine Sanctions to be attached" (505; emphasis original). According to that reflection, "all the rules of conduct which men prescribe to one another as moral rules are really—though in part unconsciously—prescribed as means to the general happiness of mankind, or of the whole aggregate of sentient beings" (8).

Sidgwick denotes the two practices that take happiness as an ultimate end as egoistic hedonism and universalistic hedonism. He often terms the former practice simply egoism. He often terms the latter practice simply utilitarianism. While egoism pursues self-interest, utilitarianism mitigates that pursuit. In discussing character traits, and especially those of a hedonistic quality, Sidgwick initially defers to Hume. "No one can read Hume's *Inquiry into the First Principles of Morals* without being convinced of this at least," he remarks in *The Methods of Ethics*, "that if a list were drawn up of the qualities of character and conduct that are directly or indirectly

productive of pleasure to ourselves or to others, it would include all that are commonly known as virtues" (424). In Sidgwick's strictest sense, virtuous acts "are always such as we conceive capable of being immediately realised by voluntary effort, at least to some extent; so that the prominent obstacle to virtuous action is absence of adequate motive" (426). On the one hand, "it is easy to see how certain acts—such as kind services—are likely to be more felicific when performed without effort, and from other motives than regard for duty" (429). Disinterested impulses must not be repressed. "Rational Self-love will best attain its end by limiting its conscious operation" (174), and this limitation often expresses itself in benevolence or "the purposive actions called 'doing Good'" (393). Simple acts of giving amount to benevolence, but on some occasions, disinterested impulses will exhort greater deeds of self-sacrifice, and "actions most conducive to the general happiness do not—in this world at least—always tend also to the greatest happiness of the agent" (9–10). On the other hand, "a person who in doing similar acts achieves a triumph of duty over strong seductive inclinations, exhibits thereby a character which we recognise as felicific in a more general way, as tending to a general performance of duty in all departments" (429). Making a duty of virtuous action can help, therefore, to forestall a lack of motive, and "if the duty of aiming at the general happiness is thus taken to include all other duties, as subordinate applications of it, we seem to be again led to the notion of Happiness as an ultimate end categorically prescribed,—only it is now General Happiness and not the private happiness of any individual" (8).

Both reasonable and studied, *The Methods of Ethics* remains the seminal work of modern utilitarianism and, as such, provides a suitable framework for the study of the ethical issues within William Faulkner's canon. "I am not a trained thinker, not a school man," Faulkner professed during his "Interviews in Japan" (1955), but a lack of education in philosophy did not hinder a moral sensitivity from pervading his literature. Indeed, this lack was a boon: no academic doubts undermined his intuitions; the "shame" he might have felt "if I were an educated man and could refer to philosophy" (134) never weighed him down. The ethical simply perfused his literary mind. "Morality is not an invention of philosophers," as Williams observes. "It is the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us" (174). For, as Faulkner's fiction evinces and as Williams avers, "moral obligation applies to people even if they do not want it to" (178). This "critical view of morality," as Eileen John concludes, is "inescapable" (295); literature "gravitate[s] toward moral concerns" (287);

this irresistible attraction "does not mean that the moral project has to be given priority within the work, but […] it has a kind of implacable presence" (293). Martha C. Nussbaum, in effect, agrees. "If our moral lives are 'stories' in which mystery and risk play a central and a valuable role," she argues in *Love's Knowledge* (1990), "then it may well seem that the 'intelligent report' of those lives requires the abilities and techniques of the teller of stories" (142).

The novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch produced many such reports. "It is important to remember that language itself is a moral medium, almost all uses of language convey value," she counsels in "Literature and Philosophy" (1997). "This is one reason why we are almost always morally active. Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral." The novel "is particularly bound to make moral judgements in so far as [its] subject-matter is the behaviour of human beings" (27). Put succinctly, the presence of morality within the novel is pervasive, and while "*there is nothing outside of the text*," as Derrida insists in *Of Grammatology* (1974) concerning the "critical production" of hermeneutics (158; emphasis original), "from the perspective of morality," as Williams asserts, "there is nowhere outside the system, or at least nowhere for a responsible agent" (178). In sum, related economies of inclusiveness inscribe the systems of language and morality, placing serious authors, literary theorists, and moral philosophers within coincidental reserves.

Recognizing this systemic imbrication, as Nussbaum does in "Perceptive Equilibrium" (1987), helps her to identify "the absence, from literary theory, of the organizing questions of moral philosophy, and of moral philosophy's sense of urgency about these questions." For Nussbaum, "the sense that we are social beings puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live—this sense of practical importance, which animates contemporary ethical theory and has always animated much of great literature—is absent from the writings of many of our leading literary theorists." Nussbaum cites Derrida as a prime offender. "One can have no clearer single measure of this absence than to have the experience of reading Jacques Derrida's *Éperons* [*Spurs* 1978] after reading Nietzsche." The work of Friedrich Nietzsche "is profoundly critical of existing ethical theory, clearly; but it is, inter alia, a response to the original Socratic question, 'How should one live?'" (243). In Nussbaum's judgment, "Derrida does not touch on that question" (243); and, what is far worse, "if one turns from criticism to more general and

theoretical writing about literature, the ethical vanishes more or less altogether" (242). Literary theorists avoid ethical philosophy. "The names of the leading moral and political philosophers of our day—of John Rawls, Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Judith Jarvis Thomson, and many others—and also the names of the great moral philosophers of the past—of Mill, Bentham, Henry Sidgwick, Rousseau, of the ethical sides of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, and Kant—do not appear, more or less, at all" (243). For Nussbaum, interpreters of the human condition, whether they are moral philosophers or literary theorists, must be ethically engaged.

"With several prominent contemporary figures—above all Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty—there is no clear answer to the question, to which profession do they belong?" complains Nussbaum in "Perceptive Equilibrium." "The question, indeed, loses its interest, since the professions share so many issues, and since differences about method are internal to each group, rather than divided simply along disciplinary lines" (242). Yet, owing to the systemic cohabitation of language and morality, as Nussbaum's statement concedes, the thoughts of those who explore these coincidental reserves cannot help but imbricate literary theory and moral philosophy; in consequence, Nussbaum's concern over disciplinary demarcation undermines her criticism of Derrida. Hence, in contradistinction to Nussbaum's "Perceptive Equilibrium," *Faulkner's Ethics* recognizes the ethical significance of Derrida's canon, writings that implicitly share many of Sidgwick's concerns (and that hold a similarly transatlantic importance).[2] For Derrida, "there is no consideration of belief in moral intuitions," as Kevin Hart observes, "and no place assigned to faith regarded as a theological virtue" (181). Even Derrida's hope in a "*justice, which* [*he*] *distinguish*[*es*] *from right*," a justice "*beyond all 'messianisms,'*" as expressed in "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone" (1998), echoes in its foundation on "*a universalizable culture of singularities*" Sidgwick's hope for the universalistic tempering of self-interest. Derrida's notion of justice relies on a naturalized faith in the other. "*This justice inscribes itself in advance in the promise, in the act of faith or in the appeal to faith that inhabits every act of language and every address to the other*," he states. "*The universalizable culture of this faith, and not of another or before all others, alone permits a 'rational' and universal discourse*" (56; emphasis original). Derrida's reliance on the reasonable, excogitative principles, which underpin a universalizable culture of singularities, resonates with Sidgwick's reasonable approach to utilitarianism. "Some form of utilitarianism," as the existentialistic Murdoch admits in

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (1992), "is probably now the most widely and instinctively accepted philosophy of the western world" (47).

Ironically, then, the intuitions that both Sidgwick and Derrida question, but that Faulkner listens to in questioning the human environment, support the currently widespread philosophical desire to promote rational prudence, with the choice of texts from Derrida's prolific oeuvre for the present volume being a matter of convergence between ethical matters of Sidgwickian, Derridean, and Faulknerian concern. Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* displays his deep respect for cognition. When he argues from the particular to the general in seeking a science of ethics that has universal applicability, the connecting thread is human rationality. In "Derrida Degree a Question of Honour" (9 May 1992), formal ontologists, critical rationalists, and formal logicians, including Barry Smith, Hans Albert, and Willard Van Orman Quine, object that "Derrida's voluminous writings […] stretch the normal forms of academic scholarship beyond recognition" (13), with that expansion bordering on the illogical and the irrational, but Derrida's reasoning is always careful and studied, showing his deep and abiding respect for alterity, a consideration that aims to extend personal horizons so that they overlap one another, a consideration that understands human rationality to facilitate and manifest that imbrication. The present volume, therefore, does not use Sidgwick to interrogate Derrida nor conduct the reverse procedure, but conciliates their moral thoughts in conducting a first parse through the ethics of Faulkner's literature. "At the crossing point of these [three] languages, each of which bears the silence of the other," to appropriate Derrida from "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" (1989), "a secret must and must not allow itself to be divulged" (94). The three authors' works "cut across each other," but while the resultant interpretations "look at the holes" (Derrida, *Glas* [1986] 210) or interstitial aporia, the interpretive emphasis remains on those ethical intersections, the essential coalescences that delimit aporetic privations.

Resolved to explore the ethical in Faulkner's canon and determined to do so with reference to Sidgwick and Derrida, the chapters that follow nevertheless defer occasionally to related findings that perceptively inform a utilitarian perspective. Other moral and political philosophers of note (as well as psychoanalysts and psychologists of renown) provide these sources. Particularly important in this regard are Parfit's reductionist findings. His contribution to the advancement of moral philosophy is difficult to underestimate. "Each of the four parts of Derek Parfit's impressive and

important book deserves detailed examination," writes Sydney Shoemaker of *Reasons and Persons*, "and nothing short of another book could give detailed examinations of them" (443). Parfit's reductionist contention, the proposition that psychological continuity and connectedness are more important than personal identity, "is widely and rightly held to be one of the finest pieces of work in contemporary philosophy" (Jonathan Glover 105). According to Alan Donagan, *Reasons and Persons*, "exhibiting strong sympathy with utilitarianism, although avoiding commitment to it, stands alone," with Parfit's volume deserving this encomium for "first show[ing] how serious are the moral difficulties raised by social policies" (772). Geoffrey McNicoll agrees. "One of Derek Parfit's several accomplishments in this fascinating and highly instructive book is to have made a substantial contribution to the development of population ethics" (545).[3]

Faulkner's intuitive morality effectively approved of Sidgwick's studied approach to personal conduct, and the utilitarian perspective on the rational theoretics of each–we dilemmas in *The Methods of Ethics* hints at one of Parfit's decisive conclusions in *Reasons and Persons*: self-interest "can be directly collectively self-defeating" (191). Faulkner's canon, so often inscribed with confrontational situations that implicate both personal morality and communal politics in their resolution, often delineates the consequences of this negative feedback. Moreover, Faulkner's embrace of the imperfect, his delineation of common instances where unmitigated self-interest becomes self-defeating, posits his literature as a domain of moral contemplation. "Given imperfect people and conditions," as Eileen John notes, "there needs to be a great deal of flexibility about what can count as a morally acceptable path through life." Embracing "the imperfect allows for a contrast between that kind of pragmatic morality and a morality of rigid expectations that appears unrealistic and insensitive by contrast" (294).

The resonances between Sidgwick's concept of and Faulkner's notion of morality help not only to evaluate the domain of moral contemplation but also to organize the current volume, sanctioning an interpretational matrix that offers not a study of Sidgwickian ethics but a prolegomenon to Faulknerian ethics, for which Sidgwick provides the principal theoretical foundation. While this introduction focuses on Faulkner's fiction, especially his novels, Faulkner's nonfictional realm demands some acknowledgment. To repeat, the duty of pursuing the general happiness includes all other virtues for Sidgwick, and in his public pronouncements, essays, speeches, open letters, and interviews, Faulkner often terms these

subordinate qualities "the verities." Having first explicitly mentioned them via the character of Horace Benbow in *Flags in the Dust* (1929)—"they've just gone through with an experience that pretty well shook the verities and the humanities," the lawyer states of the veterans of World War I, "and whether they know it or not, they've got another one ahead of 'em that'll pretty well finish the business" (675)—Faulkner did not publically enumerate these verities until his "Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature" (10 December 1950). They appear in this speech during Faulkner's advice to the aspiring author, who "must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice" (120).

Faulkner's inventory of virtues is short in comparison with Benjamin Franklin's seminal enumeration in *The Autobiography* (1791). Franklin's manifest comprises temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. The touchstone for Franklin is what Sidgwick would call "'Good' or 'Wellbeing.'" This ultimate standard "appears clearly when we consider any virtue in relation to the cognate vice—or at least *non-virtue*—into which it tends to pass over when pushed to an extreme, or exhibited under inappropriate conditions." For instance, "Common Sense may seem to regard Liberality, Frugality, Courage, Placability, as intrinsically desirable: but when we consider their relation respectively to Profusion, Meanness, Foolhardiness, Weakness, we find that Common Sense draws the line in each case not by immediate intuition, but by reference either to some definite maxim of duty, or to the general notion of 'Good' or Wellbeing: and similarly when we ask at what point Candour, Generosity, Humility cease to be virtues by becoming 'excessive'" (*Methods* 392; emphasis original).[4]

Franklin's determination to personify his manifest of virtues and the rigorousness of his daily self-testing in this matter hint at his own excessive and ultimately self-defeating, moral zeal. One cannot "ignore the fundamental importance of the restrictive and repressive virtues, or think that they are sufficiently developed in ordinary men at the present time, so that they may properly be excluded from moral admiration," concedes Sidgwick. Even so, in many instances, "they have been too prominent, to the neglect of other valuable qualities, in the common conception of moral Perfection." Franklin typified the quest for such perfection. In

contrast, an enlightened moral theorist "is likely to lay less stress on the cultivation of those negative virtues, tendencies to restrict and refrain, which are prominent in the Common-Sense ideal of character," counsels Sidgwick, "and to set more value in comparison on those qualities of mind which are the direct source of positive pleasure to the agent or to others—some of which Common Sense scarcely recognises as excellences" (*Methods* 494). Faulkner's ethical perspective did not follow Franklin's self-avowed desire to "imitate Jesus and Socrates" (1385); rather, as the more frugal and moderate list of verities in his "Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature" implies, Faulkner's felicific attitude was reasonably akin to Sidgwick's own.

Having set out his moral store, and having been asked and having accepted the role of American cultural ambassador after receiving his Nobel laureateship, Faulkner felt called on, and was occasionally explicitly asked, to reiterate his ethical stance. Shortly before embarking on his official tour of the Far East, he published an essay titled "On Privacy" (July 1955), which sets the loss of individual privacy in the context of the vanishing American Dream. That dream of "a sanctuary on the earth for individual man" (62) envisaged "liberty in which to have an equal start at equality with all other men, and freedom in which to defend and preserve that equality." The means of that defense were "individual courage," "honorable work," and "mutual responsibility" (65). Behavior had to square with conscience. "Each" person had to take account of the collective "we." Indeed, acts in accordance with conscience—and here Faulkner cites "self-discipline" (70), "gratitude for kindness, fidelity to friendship, chivalry toward women and the capacity to love" (71)—"alone" differentiate "us from animals" (71). The loss of individual privacy, however, as symptomatic of the failure to achieve the American Dream, indicts that unheralded and unidentifiable "moment in our history when we decided that the old simple moral verities over which taste and responsibility were the arbiters and controls, were obsolete and to be discarded" (71).

A month later, while Faulkner was in Japan, an interviewer enquired about "*pieta*, *gloria*, *virtus*, etc." in his novels. Were these human values of classical origin? "Have you studied Latin literature in your young years?" queried the interviewer. "I didn't," responded Faulkner, "because I doubt very much if the Latins invented glory and pity and integrity. I think that the Latins, like all the people, inherited a knowledge of glory and pity and integrity. I don't think they invented it, and I don't think that one has to have studied any literature to believe that glory and pity and

integrity are important and valuable. I've seen ignorant people that didn't know the words, that acted on the belief that they were valuable and important" (134). Later, during the same tour, Faulkner visited the Philippines, where he talked at some length about freedom, conscience, and governance. One means employed by unreasonable authority in maintaining mastery, as Derrida argues in *The Gift of Death* (1995), relies on the inculcation of "responsibility as culpability" (56); Derrida draws on Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) to support this claim, and despite his reluctance to read philosophy, Faulkner's peroration in the Philippines echoes Kierkegaard too:

> The urgent question—truth—is freedom; that people—man—shall be free. And it seems to me that in the world today are not two ideologies facing one another that keep everybody else in fear and trembling. I would say that it is one everybody else in fear and trembling. I would say that it is one ideology against a simple natural desire of people to be free, and that I would choose to be free, and I don't believe that man can be free under a monolithic form of government. I think that he has got to have the liberty to make mistakes, to blunder, and to find his way, but primarily he must be free to say what he wants, to behave as he wants within the verities of universal truth which are that the weak shall be protected, that children shall be defended, that women shall be defended, that people shall not lie to each other, that no man shall be compelled to do what his conscience tells him is wrong to do, that he must have complete freedom within a government which allows him the right to be a check on that government, that when he does not like that government, he can say it: I don't like this and I will try to change it. ("Faulkner in Manila" 199–200)[5]

Faulkner insisted that truth was a responsibility of authorship. "What I mean by truth is the universal truth of compassion, honor, pride, courage, law." The responsible writer should not feel "inhibited from telling that truth" (205). Unreasonable authority should be resisted.

Kierkegaard emphasizes the same point in analyzing the biblical tale of Abraham and Isaac. Although God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Kierkegaard specifically "recalls," as Derrida notes, "Abraham's strange reply to Isaac when the latter asks him where the sacrificial lamb is to be found" (*Gift of Death* 58–59), because that response—"God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering" (Genesis 22.8)—prioritizes the father's compact with God. "He doesn't keep silent and he doesn't lie," remarks Derrida. "He doesn't speak nontruth." This covenant

worries both Kierkegaard and Derrida. "According to Kierkegaard," expounds Derrida, "the highest expression of the ethical is in terms of what binds us to our own and to our fellows (that can be the family but also the actual community of friends or the nation)." Each individual must be active in protecting that individual's encompassing collective, but "by keeping the secret," as Derrida explains, "Abraham betrays ethics." Abraham's "silence, or at least the fact that he doesn't divulge the secret of the sacrifice he has been asked to make, is certainly not designed to save Isaac" (*Gift of Death* 59). This silence articulates Abraham's acquiescence to unreasonable authority, his willingness to perform an irresponsible sacrifice—and a similarly troubling compact informs Faulkner's understanding of extreme benevolence, with the virtue of self-sacrifice becoming a major aspect of both *Light in August* (1932) and *A Fable* (1954).

Faulkner explicitly returned to this theme in his "Interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel" (1956). "An artist can use Christianity simply as just another tool, like a carpenter would borrow a hammer?" queried Heuvel. "The carpenter we are speaking of never lacks that hammer," replied Faulkner.

> No one is without Christianity, if we agree on what we mean by the word. It is every individual's individual code of behavior, by means of which he makes himself a better human being than his nature wants to be, if he followed his nature only. Whatever its symbol—cross or crescent or whatever—that symbol is man's reminder of his duty inside the human race. Its various allegories are the charts against which he measures himself and learns to know what he is. It cannot teach man to be good as the text book teaches him mathematics. It shows him how to discover himself, evolve for himself a moral code and standard within his capacities and aspirations, by giving him a matchless example of suffering and sacrifice and the promise of hope. (246–47)

During his final public appearance, which took place at West Point in April 1962, Faulkner was again drawn back to the verities. "Sir, last night you stated that the basic goal of an author was to portray the conflict of the human heart. Now, just what do you feel today is the chief trouble with which people are concerned, or should be, and how much has this changed since, let's say in particular, the time of the Depression?" he was asked. "I don't think it has changed at all basically," he responded. "Only the ephemeral symptoms alter—they are not too important. But basically

the drives of the heart are the same. It's the verities, for the verities have been the same ever since Socrates, which are courage and pride and honor—compassion." The basis of ethics does not change. "It's man's knowledge that at bottom he is not very brave, that he is not very compassionate, but he wants to be—his conscience—call it what you will, call it God, but he wants to be better than he is afraid that he might be—that he might fail, yet he still tries," and that striving necessarily involves "the verities which all the writing is about" (69).

To the same end, Sidgwick also defers in *The Methods of Ethics to* the Father of Western Philosophy, first recalling how "Socrates is said by Aristotle to have applied inductive reasoning to ethical questions" (98–99), and second remarking how Socrates's teachings on virtue emerged from this reasonable process. "Just as the generalisations of physical science rest on particular observations," maintains Sidgwick, "so in ethics general truths can only be reached by induction from judgments or perceptions relating to the rightness or wrongness of particular acts" (98). For the reasonable agent, the person who acknowledges collective demands, that process counsels the conscientious mitigation of self-interest. As he recalls in his "Preface to the Second Edition" (1877) of *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick initially turned to Joseph Butler (1692–1752)—whose philosophical approach to duty at once challenged and helped to reform early utilitarianism—to support this conclusion. "Reasonable self-love and conscience are the chief or superior principles in the nature of man," states Butler in "Sermon III. Upon Human Nature" (1726),

> because an action may be suitable to this nature, though all other principles be violated, but becomes unsuitable if either of those are. Conscience and self-love, if we understand our true happiness, always lead us the same way. Duty and interest are perfectly coincident; for the most part in this world, but entirely and in every instance if we take in the future and the whole; this being implied in the notion of a good and perfect administration of things. Thus they who have been so wise in their generation as to regard only their own supposed interest, at the expense and to the injury of others, shall at last find, that he who has given up all the advantages of the present world, rather than violate his conscience and the relations of life, has infinitely better provided for himself, and secured his own interest and happiness. (52–53)

"I do not (I believe) differ materially from Butler in my view either of reasonable self-love, or—theology apart—of its relation to conscience,"

maintains Sidgwick. "Nor, again, do I differ from him in regarding conscience as essentially a function of the practical Reason." Sidgwick's "difference only begins when I ask myself, 'What among the precepts of our common conscience do we really see to be ultimately reasonable?' a question which Butler does not seem to have seriously put, and to which, at any rate, he has given no satisfactory answer" ("Preface to the Second Edition" xiii). Sidgwick found that acceptable response in Bentham's utilitarianism, which supplies the overarching ethical principle that establishes and directs the virtues that the present study places under the headings of *responsibility*, *benevolence*, *duty*, and *universalism*.

These precepts find expression in one of the rare occasions on which Derrida explicitly mentions Faulkner. Derrida's engagements with literature and literary figures tend to lie elsewhere, with Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Celan in particular, but Derrida's relationship to modernism, especially to the work of James Joyce, reveals what Andrew J. Mitchell and Sam Slote call "a shaping hand in his own set of philosophical concerns" (1). A relatable conjunction (and possible molding) emerges between the Derridean and the Faulknerian, and that emergence concerns the ethical dimensions of writing and the responsible, dutiful, benevolent, and universalistic concerns of authorship. Even if writing is not explicitly "a moral or political duty," argues Derrida in "This Strange Institution Called Literature" (1989), "this experience of writing is 'subject' to an imperative: to give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which, in changing language, change more than language" (55).

The creative self-sacrifice in acquiescing to this imperative "is always more interesting" than the simple act of repetition. "In order for this singular performativity to be effective, for something new to be produced," maintains Derrida, "historical competence is not indispensable in a certain form (that of a certain academic kind of knowledge, for example, on the subject of literary history), but it increases the chances." Overtaken by the experience of writing, an author "cannot not be concerned, interested, anxious about the past, that of literature, history, or philosophy, of culture in general. S/he cannot not take account of it in some way and not consider her- or himself a responsible heir, inscribed in a genealogy, whatever the ruptures or denials on this subject may be. And the sharper the rupture

is, the more vital the genealogical responsibility" ("This Strange Institution" 55). That *Absalom*, a novel to which Faulknerians and critics of literary modernism grant both supreme importance in the author's canon and great importance in twentieth-century literature, closes with a supplemental or an adjunctive "Genealogy" (314–15) is one small indication of Faulkner's commitment to this responsibility. Faulkner could not fail to credit the past. "Account cannot not be taken, whether one wish it or not, of the past," asserts Derrida. "Once again, this historicity or this historical responsibility is not necessarily linked to awareness, knowledge, or even the themes of history. What I have just suggested is as valid for Joyce, that immense allegory of historical memory, as for Faulkner, who doesn't write in such a way that he gathers together at every sentence, and in several languages at once, the whole of Western culture" ("This Strange Institution" 55).

In the present volume, the concepts of responsibility, benevolence, duty, and universalism subsume Faulkner's varying list of verities, with this strategy not only retaining the integrity of these organizing precepts but also prompting the chapter headings that structure the discussion that follows. That discussion is generally chronological, lightly sketching the trajectory of moral concerns in Faulkner's career, with *Absalom* as the apparent keystone to his canon. Six chapters flank the analysis of egoistic and universalistic hedonism undertaken in Chap. 4 that forms the architectonic and interpretative center of *Faulkner's Ethics*: the two outermost sections (Chaps. 1 and 7) consider responsibility with respective reference to "Barn Burning" (1939) and *A Fable* (1954); the two sections (Chaps. 2 and 6) within these discussions concern benevolence with respective reference to self-sacrifice in *Light in August* (1932) and the economics of the gift in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948); and the two sections closest to the interpretative center of the book (Chaps. 3 and 5) examine duty with respective reference to *Pylon* (1935) and *The Unvanquished* (1938). Concluding with a further examination of *A Fable*, titled "The Levine Shadow," *Faulkner's Ethics* dares to question the canonical status of *Absalom*, suggesting that Faulkner attempts to shift his keystone from the earlier to the later novel, doing so under the ethical demands of the Holocaust.

Thus, the chapters that follow answer Sidgwick's request in *The Methods of Ethics* to consider "the absolute and independent validity of common moral precepts." That deliberation must appeal "firstly to intuitive judgment after due consideration of the question when fairly placed before it:

and secondly to a comprehensive comparison of the ordinary judgments of mankind" (400). In turn, this procedure, as a means of promoting Sidgwick's overarching plea to practice the universal mitigation of self-interest, must pass the test of undecidability. "One often associates the theme of undecidability with deconstruction," observes Derrida in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" (1990). "Yet,"

> the undecidable is not merely the oscillation between two significations or two contradictory and very determinate rules, each equally imperative (for example, respect for equity and universal right, but also for the always heterogeneous and unique singularity of the unsubsumable example). The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions. Undecidable—this is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule, must [*doit*] nonetheless—it is of *duty* [*devoir*] that one must speak—deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules. A decision that would not go through the test and ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision; it would only be the programmable application or the continuous unfolding of a calculable process. It might perhaps be legal; it would not be just. (252; emphasis original)

In effect, Sidgwick undertakes this justifiable process in *The Methods of Ethics*, and that undertaking confirms his assertion that "no quality has ever been praised as excellent by mankind generally which cannot be shown to have some marked felicific effect, and to be within proper limits obviously conducive to the general happiness" (493). Nevertheless, "it does not follow that such qualities are always fostered and encouraged by society in the proportion which a Utilitarian would desire: in fact, it is a common observation to make, in contemplating the morality of societies," as Sidgwick admits, "that some useful qualities are unduly neglected, while others are over-prized and even admired when they exist in such excess as to become, on the whole, infelicific" (493–94).

To promote felicific tendencies, the complementary perspectives of Sidgwick and Derrida encourage a rounded approach to the utilitarian contemplation of responsibility, benevolence, duty, and universalism; the present volume appeals to their authoritative but reasonable findings; and under this encouragement, Faulkner's canon reveals the ethical complexities of those human interconnections of which Judith Sutpen speaks in *Absalom*. "Faulkner's struggle is epic," writes Noel Polk in *Faulkner and Welty and the Southern Literary Tradition* (2008), "a heroic confrontation

between cosmic forces—love and hate; justice and injustice; life and death—that are eternally antagonistic to each other and to human peace: one lives only under the terms of existential combat. It's an intensely moral struggle, that puts humanity—*man* he would say—in an irresolvable universal conflict whose antagonisms are permanently fixed in the nature of things" (11; emphasis original). *Faulkner's Ethics* offers the first extended analysis of this intense struggle.

Notes

1. Henceforth, unless stated otherwise, citations from *The Methods of Ethics* pertain to this edition.
2. The present volume also shares Frank Kermode's opinion in "Endings, Continued" (1989) of Derrida's approach to literature: "the presence of a stable 'crafted text' protected by constructive readings is hard to deny and is allowed even by Derrida" (86).
3. *On What Matters* (2011–17), Parfit's second and final major publication, appeared almost thirty years after *Reasons and Persons*. "*On What Matters*," in Husain Sarkar's judgment, "is a masterpiece. In this massive, profound, and powerful book—actually, says Parfit, it is several books rolled into one—Parfit offers in two large volumes innumerable fresh, deep, and systematic arguments, arguments that are as complex as they are lucid and learned, probing and meticulous, with hordes of intriguing examples and counterexamples, that constitute his moral theory; it is a veritable *tour de force*" (x).
4. In Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939), the reluctant utilitarian Harry Wilbourne says something to similar yet sarcastic effect: "it was only recently I have clearly seen, followed out the logical conclusion, that it is one of what we call the prime virtues—thrift, industry, independence—that breeds all the vices—fanaticism, smugness, meddling, fear, and worst of all, respectability" (585). The utilitarian aspects of Wilbourne's thinking come to the fore most explicitly in his conversations with the newspaper reporter McCord. For, despite his anti-utilitarian credentials—McCord responds to Wilbourne's peroration on the deathly turn from autumn to winter with "for sweet Jesus Schopenhauer" (563)—Harry confronts the economically desperate situation he and Charlotte Rittenmeyer share with a calculating mind that forever fights that inborn will connoted by his surname.
5. Blotner's catalogue in *Faulkner's Library* and the deposits of her father's materials made by Jill Faulkner Summers to the University of Virginia Library suggest that Faulkner never owned any volumes by Kierkegaard.

CHAPTER 2

Responsibility (I): "Barn Burning"

In considering responsibility with reference to "the state of mind in which acts are done" (201), Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900) faces an immediate problem in *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), because "the distinction between 'motive' and 'intention' in ordinary language is not very precise." This imprecision arises because "we apply the term 'motive' to foreseen consequences of an act, so far as they are conceived to be objects of desire to the agent, or to the desire of such consequences: and when we speak of the intention of an act we usually, no doubt, have desired consequences in view." Nevertheless, undesired but predictable outcomes often arise, so "for purposes of exact moral or jural discussion, it is best to include under the term 'intention' all the consequences of an act that are foreseen as certain or probable." Sidgwick insists on these inclusions because "we cannot evade responsibility for any foreseen bad consequences of our acts by the plea that we felt no desire for them, either for their own sake or as means to ulterior ends: such undesired accompaniments of the desired results of our volitions are clearly chosen or willed by us" (202).

In also recognizing volition and concomitant outcomes, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) suggests in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1992) that actions make one "*responsible* for what one gives and what one receives" (63; emphasis original). This double bind cannot help but relate the economies of morality and language. "Language gives one to think," he explains, "but it also steals, spirits away from us, whispers to us [*elle nous souffle*], and withdraws the responsibility that it seems to inaugurate;

M. Wainwright, *Faulkner's Ethics*,
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