

Williams: Critique of utilitarianism

INDIFFERENCE. Williams begins by observing that consequentialism is indifferent to the specific relation between the agent A and the state of affairs s that somehow results from A 's ϕ -ing. ϕ -ing may consist in s , it may cause s directly or indirectly, perhaps through some other agent's ψ -ing. No matter: as long as you can reasonably expect s to be an effect of ϕ -ing, consequentialism recommends you to ϕ . 93

Williams intends to argue that in some situations, at least according to some intuitions, it matters crucially whether s was produced by *me* or by someone else. I may, that is, regard s as morally good/bad depending on whether I was 'involved' directly in its production or was merely one of its (remote) causal factors. Hence consequentialism is committed to the following: 94

Negative responsibility An agent x is responsible for ϕ -ing if: x can ψ , ψ -ing will prevent ϕ -ing performed by $y \neq x$, and x fails to ψ . 95

Williams then observes that this principle of negative responsibility is not unique to utilitarianism. It is an application, within the consequentialist setting, of a wider doctrine of impartiality. Normally we think of impartiality as applying to the effects of our actions, specifically the distribution of goods generally understood. We might say: 96

Impartial distribution For every agent x , every agent y , every good g : if x distributes g to y , then the 'prior' relation between x and y , if there is any, should play no role in x 's deliberation and eventual distribution of g .

It is notoriously difficult to specify this prior relation fully generally, but in particular cases the intent is clear. The thought behind it is that the distribution of g must be done in an abstractly just way, ignoring the identities of x and y , hence also ignoring the relation between them that, informally, is irrelevant to the distribution of g .

The consequentialist takes this principle one step further. He in effect proposes the following:

Impartial production For every agent x , every agent y , every state of affairs s , every action ϕ : if s can be brought about by ϕ -ing, then there is no relevant difference whether ϕ -ing is performed by x or $y \neq x$.

This impartiality on steroids, says Williams, may explain why utilitarianism appears to many as an especially high-minded doctrine. But this is also why it is a wrong one. Williams will substantiate this claim with a couple of examples. 96

GEORGE THE CHEMIST. George is a conscientious chemist opposed to developing CBW. One day he is offered a job to develop CBW. He is told that, if he refuses the offer, the job will go to NN who is very keen on this research. Moreover, if he accepts the job, there will be some immediate and tangible benefits to his family. What is he supposed to do?

JIM AND THE INDIANS. Jim, on a visit to Latin America, finds himself in the company of miscreants who are about to shoot twenty innocent Indians. Jim is offered a choice: either he shoots one Indian and the rest go free, or else all twenty will die. What is he supposed to do?

THE UTILITARIAN VERDICT. Williams argues that, according to utilitarianism, George obviously has to accept the offer, and that Jim obviously must shoot the Indian. But, even if this were true, it would not be *obviously* true.

A possible utilitarian retort: not always there is a choice between a good action and a bad action. Sometimes we choose between a bad and a very bad. So, for example, we do not say that killing the one Indian is *good*. We only say that, under the circumstances, it is better than doing nothing.

Question 1. Does the utilitarian retort work?

Question 2. Can the theory of subordinate principles be invoked to deal with Williams' examples?

REMOTE EFFECTS. Williams takes his examples to provide intuitive evidence against utilitarianism. He then asks how utilitarianism could deal with them. In other words, how could an utilitarian judge George's choice to produce CBW and Jim's decision to kill the Indian both morally wrong? One standard way is by looking into the effects these actions could have on the agents' characters and on public interest. We look into two types of effects, psychological effects like corruption of character, and social effects, like setting a precedent.

Generally this idea of remote effects works as follows. Suppose I borrowed some money from you. Then you die before I could return the money. Your family is very rich. My family is very poor. It may be that, by the utilitarian standard, I am not obligated to return the money. But wait: by lying on this occasion I may get used to lying, and so this locally beneficial lie is likely to lead to globally bad consequences. \Rightarrow I should return the money for purely utilitarian reasons.

Similarly, suppose we punish one innocent person to deter a thousand criminals. This might be right by the utilitarian standard. But wait: we are setting a precedent of punishing innocents, thus producing very many bad consequences in the more remote future. \Rightarrow We should not punish that innocent person for purely utilitarian reasons.

Williams' argument is subtle. First, observe that the very idea of remote effects can take off only if we *already* believe that the action was wrong. Otherwise, why would these remote effects be adverse? Second, in the case of Jim the utilitarian may appeal to self-indulgent squeamishness that would be encouraged in the agent's character. But such feeling of 'squeamishness' is inappropriately self-indulgent only if we have already adopted an utilitarian point of view. On the contrary, Williams urges, this feeling is legitimate, and its presence is itself evidence for us not being utilitarians.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR PEDRO. The utilitarian justification of Jim's shooting an innocent Indian relies on the idea that, if Jim does nothing, Pedro will mow down 20 Indians. So, if Jim were to do nothing, he would be responsible for the death of 20 Indians. This is a much worse outcome than to be responsible for the death of just one Indian.

Williams replies: the very fact of doing nothing should not make Jim responsible for the killing of 20 Indians. What it does is shift responsibility onto Pedro. Pedro (or his captain) is not a robot. When Jim withdraws, it is up to Pedro to shoot or not to shoot the Indians. The utilitarian makes Jim responsible not simply for the ⟨killing of Indians⟩, but rather for ⟨Pedro's killing for Indians⟩. In other words, Jim is made responsible for Pedro's decisions (if he were to do nothing). But why should anyone be held responsible for anyone else's decisions? This is unreasonable. Pedro would lie, if he were to say to Jim, 'Well, you leave me with no choice, now I *have to* shoot all these people etc.' There is always a choice.

[I wonder what Williams would say if Pedro were a dragon. Suppose Pedro the dragon needs human flesh to satisfy his hunger. Suppose Jorge is one fat Indian. If Pedro eats Jorge, his hunger will be satisfied for a whole week. But Pedro cannot visually distinguish between fat and thin Indians. And so here we are: Pedro is about to eat 20 captured Indians, while Jim happens to stumble on the scene (he is not in danger himself, since dragons cannot stand the European body odour). So Jim has a choice: either feed Jorge to Pedro, thus saving 19 thin Indians, or else do nothing, and let Pedro eat these 19 Indians plus Jorge as a dessert. The point here is to make Pedro a force of nature, rather than a human agent capable of decisions. Would Jim, by remaining passive, be responsible for the deaths of 20 Indians fed to the dragon?]

In any event the utilitarian is not short of responses. The choice of Pedro (the soldier) is indisputable, as is Pedro's moral and legal responsibility if he carries on the shootings. But in remaining passive Jim accepts some share of moral responsibility (though perhaps not legal responsibility) for the deaths of at least 19 Indians. If he had absolutely no such responsibility, then what is the difference between him being at the scene of the execution and him being in Australia? No doubt the fact of the offer and the details of Jim's situation make him involved in the execution process. The onus is now on Williams to spell out this involvement.

Question 3. Should Williams modify his response in the case of Pedro the dragon (as opposed to the case of Pedro the soldier)?

PROJECTS. Utilitarianism says that people must pursue the increase in overall happiness. But people pursue happiness indirectly—through their localised goals. A person who pursues happiness directly is going to find its opposite. I develop a cure for cancer, perhaps indeed for the greater benefit of

mankind. To make any progress I must be committed to my work. Cancer research must become a long-term project of mine. So, Williams reasons, after all I am involved in the project of cancer research, rather than in the project of happiness pursuit (which anyway makes little sense).

If this point is granted, then the complaint is as follows. Utilitarianism requires the agent, if a certain moment arrives, to abandon his values and goals (\approx projects) for the sake of protecting the overall happiness in the world. Thus George may have worked all his life against CBW. But a moment came, and he is forced to abandon all that he believes in, and begin to work on CBW in order to avert an even worse situation.

Williams argues that in this case George becomes 'alienated' from his actions, and that he loses his 'integrity'. That is, he is no longer involved in the things he does, and that the things he does run against his convictions. A man who commits adultery with his friend's wife, or cheats a charity fund, or breaks a promise to his children—this man, we say, has no (or low) integrity. He generally agrees that one does not harm one's own friend, that a charity fund is doing an important job, or that lying to children is awful. But he cannot follow up on his own beliefs, either because of his weak character, or because of conflicting desires, or for some other reason. The man's actions, beliefs, motives, and habits do not form a unified, integral whole.

But an utilitarian will be unimpressed. In the first place, George should not be alienated from his action. On the contrary: he now works in CBW with the full understanding of minimising the possible damage done by the keen NN. So what he is doing is very much in line with his beliefs on CBW. If his belief was, '*I should never work on CBW*', then of course it is compromised. But such a belief is self-oriented. There is nothing much to recommend it for. Working for a greater good frequently involves doing things that are not very pleasant for you, or the things you would not do were it not for a greater good. And these facts are just a reflection of a hierarchical structure of our goals. As long as you are aware of a higher goal, working for an intermediate goal—that taken in isolation might be unworthy—should not be alienating or damaging to your integrity.

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