Ethics // Spring 2025

Handout 17

Critique of deontology and utilitarianism: Williams

THE KANTIAN VIEW. Williams identifies a unique ' moral point of view ' in Kantianism. It's not clear what the ' point of view ' actually is. Let us say that a Kantian philosophy contains claims about a unique form of motivation and justification that a moral agent is supposed to have. Both of them are characterised by impartiality and indifference to particular persons and circumstances. In being *morally* motivated to help *NN* I must be governed by some general principle that doesn't mention the fact that *NN* is my sister, say. Analogously for justification. 2

Williams immediately notes that these general principles need not *rule out* considerations of personal connections that are necessarily not impartial and objective. But the status of these considerations in the moral theory is very unclear. 2

Rawls' device of the original position illustrates this broadly Kantian outlook. The agents choose principles of justice having ignored all that is particular to them—their personal tastes, preferences, commitments. The moral choice of an agent is the choice of an abstract agent. The Kantian view proposes to ignore the *identity* of persons. 3

THE UTILITARIAN VIEW. Echoing Rawls, Williams says that utilitarianism ignores the *separateness* of persons. This comes in two ways. Utility is maximised without any regard who receives what utility. If there were a utility-monster who could generate and experience all the utility produced in the actual world, then his world would be as good as the actual one. Secondly, there is the question of agency. The subject of utility is a state of affairs. Hence, the relevant causal relations bearing on responsibility and integrity are ignored. 3 4

Example 1 (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 to 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? The utilitarian is apt to say that George ought to carry on. 13-14

Example 2 (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 die. What is he supposed to do? The utilitarian recommends that he shoot the Indian.

In all such situations, the utilitarian is aiming at the best possible state of affairs, ignoring how exactly we arrive at it—hence ignoring the relevant contributions of different agents. Who does what is of no consequence.

The Kantian theory is supposed to dispute this approach. But, Williams says, it is not clear whether it can give more room for individual character and personal relations than utilitarianism. 5

CHARACTER AND SURVIVAL. The foil for Williams' discussion is the ideas of Derek Parfit. Parfit defends a ' Complex View ' of personal identity. If, as suggested already by Locke, psychological continuity is what matters for personal identity, then this has to be taken into account by the moral theory. In particular, the scalar nature of that continuity must have an effect on how we think of rights and wrongs. Its other effect is separateness of persons. If my present self is continuous with my later self only to a certain degree, then perhaps my self is distinct from another self also only to a certain degree. 6

Williams then argues that the Complex View can't be ' mirrored ' in moral thinking, at least not obviously so. If, for example, I make a promise to A, I can't then fulfil it to a certain degree to A^* who is, to the same degree, continuous with A. Williams concludes not that the Complex View is inconsistent, but that it forces a too radical revision in our moral thought. 7-8 8

There is, however, one area of moral concern where graduality (scalarity) seems to be at home. It is our concern with our own future. We naturally have more intense concern with what happens to me in the near future than with the more distant one. Similarly, it may be argued, certain ground projects and values of mine constitute what I am practically. Once there is a drastic change in them, my concern is liable to decrease. 8

But, Williams argues, even here (or especially here?) the talk of future selves can't be taken too seriously. When I speak of my future selves and their future projects, it is still *my* future selves (or 9

simply: *my future*) and *my* future projects. It is not as if I first identify some future person SB-in-2035 and then enquire about his character and its similarity to mine. The proximity and remoteness of my future self are constituted by the relation of his character to my present self. That's all that there is to the difference between SB-in-2025 and SB-in-2035. It is otherwise with the relation between me and other (ordinary) people. There, I first identify a particular person and *then* enquire about the congeniality of his character to mine.

The same pattern is exhibited in thinking about the authority of my current self over my future selves, or: the authority of my current projects over my future projects. Is it possible to try to inhibit present projects by arguing that a future self would disapprove of them? Or is it the other way round: we can, at most, inhibit future projects because they clash with the present ones? However we answer the question, implicit in our reasoning is the assumption that that these are the projects of one and the same individual. If these were the projects of distinct individuals (selves), there could be no way out of this relativism. 10

Utilitarianism obscures the distinction between my projects and your projects, on one hand, and my projects now and my projects later, on the other. The Kantian approach obscures the very notion of *my* projects. Since, as a moral agent, I am stripped of everything that is particular to me, of any particular emotion or desire, I no longer have the motive to survive at all (' to go on '). This approach also involves an objectivist perspective on one's life. It is as if my life is a rectangle to be optimally, rationally filled in. 12 12

But, Williams insists, this is not so. The right perspective on my life is from now. It is necessarily subjective. How I see my life is necessarily how I see it from now. Even when I criticise my present values and think that later on I will adopt better ones (or at least different ones), I do that, again, from the present perspective. That is, the critique is possible because I am *now* dissatisfied with my present values. 13

GROUND PROJECTS. Emerging from Williams' discussion is a special category of ground projects. They give meaning to the person's life, propel him to the future, all of this to the extent that if they are frustrated, the person may feel ' he might as well have died '. These projects, of course, are in many cases self-centred. An artist cultivates *his* abilities and is quite unconcerned with advancing art as such, including through the achievement of others. But, as Williams notes, this need not be so. George, for example, is altrustically concerned (we suppose) about the non-proliferation of CBW. The same idea of non-proliferation drives the utilitarian to recommend to George staying in his job out of worry about the ruthless *NN*. But this is what George ought to be reluctant to compromise on. It will be ' unreasonable ' for him to so compromise. 13 14

Williams in effect restates and strengthens Rawls' complaint against utilitarianism (see the Rawls handout). Rawls' slogan was that utiliarianism fails to respect the ' separateness ' of persons. Well, people *are* separate, because they have different ground projects—that is, different characters. Impartial morality, whether Kantian or utilitarian, refuses to recognise. Hence the hopeless demands that attitudes typically afflicted with partiality, like love or friendship, must somehow be purified and brought into the fold of impartiality. 15 16

Williams' point is the *recognition* of conflict between impartial morality and personal relations, where these relations are taken at face value (instead of being reduced to their moralistic versions). It is explicitly not the claim that personal relations must take priority over morality. It is the recognition that personal relations, where partiality is strongest, must themselves constitute reasons in practical deliberations. They need not be embedded in impartial moral demands. That is, the reasoning: 17 18

(17-1) This is my wife, that's why I have to save her.

is already good enough. We need not be driven by the impartial principle, like:

(17-2) Moral theory classifies this situation as one where one is permitted to save one's wife, rather than another person. Hence I have to save her.