

24.231 Ethics – Handout 13 Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”

First, some preliminaries:

It's important to be clear about what views Williams' argument, and the other arguments we've been considering, target:

- (1) What matters to determining the moral status (right/required, permissible, impermissible) of my actions?

Consequentialism: Only the amount of good produced by my actions is relevant to their moral status. The *right* act is the one that produces the most *good*. Consequentialism requires that we can identify what is good before we know what is right.

Deontology?: There may be factors other than the amount of good they produce that are relevant to determining the moral status of my actions. Some ways of thinking about this:

- (i) there may be *constraints* on what I may (morally) do for the sake of producing the most good (e.g. sacrificing the innocent, violating rights, ...)
- (ii) in addition to how much good my actions produce, it may matter whether I am *doing harm* to someone to produce it, rather than *merely allowing harms* to persist which I could have prevented
- (iii) it may matter to the moral assessment of my act whether harms it allows to happen were brought about by other agents
- (iv) some actions may be required or permissible for me in virtue of who I am, even if they produce less good than alternative actions (agent-relative duties or permissions)
- (v) there may be some other morally-relevant factors, such as whether goods have been distributed equally, or whether people have gotten what they deserve, that are not best understood as being themselves *goods*, as opposed to moral requirements (if equality, e.g., is to be understood as a good, that might invite the leveling down objection); and if we do take equal distribution or people getting what they deserve to be goods, they might not be goods we can identify without a prior conception of the *right* – that is, we might think they're good because they are right, rather than that promoting them is right because they are good

- (2) What factors contribute to the *goodness* of an outcome?

Welfarism: The goodness of outcomes depends only on the amount of individual *well-being*, counting everyone's well-being as equally important, they contain.

We might accept Consequentialism but reject Welfarism – e.g., if we think some other things, such as an equal distribution of well-being or resources, or people's getting what

they deserve, or some impersonal goods like knowledge or beauty, contribute to the good beyond the contribution they make to individual people's well-being.

(3) What factors contribute to a person's *well-being*?

Hedonism: The only things that contribute to a person's well-being are the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain.

Desire-or-Preference-Satisfaction View: Well-being consists in having your preferences satisfied.

Objective List View: Being well-off is a matter of having certain goods in one's life (such as true friendships, knowledge, the appreciation of beauty, happiness) that are objectively worth having.

Utilitarianism combines Consequentialism with Welfarism. Mill's version of Utilitarianism also adopts a Hedonist account of well-being.

It's useful to think, as we read, about whether the objections we're considering are objections to Hedonism, Welfarism, or Consequentialism.

Williams' Critique

The examples: George and Jim. Can the Utilitarian/the Consequentialist explain why George's and Jim's decisions seem to us at least difficult?

Three issues:

- (1) Consequentialism does not recognize a morally significant difference between doing something and allowing it to happen. It makes no difference to the moral status of my action whether I brought about some outcome myself or whether I merely failed to prevent it.

The Doctrine of Negative Responsibility: "if I know that if I do X, O₁ will eventuate, and if I refrain from doing X, O₂ will, and that O₂ is worse than O₁, then I am responsible for O₂ if I refrain from doing X." (Is this plausible in the case where O₂ is better than O₁?)

- (2) Consequentialism does not recognize a morally significant difference between doing something and failing to stop someone else from doing something. That is, it doesn't allow that "each of us is specially responsible for what *he* does, rather than what other people do."

Is (2) is importantly different from (1)?

(1) asks whether it matters, when we evaluate a person's actions, whether the harms and benefits they result in were things the person actively caused, or merely allowed to happen; (2) asks whether it matters, when we evaluate a person's actions, whether the harms and benefits they result in were things the person caused, or whether they were caused by another agent.

Are we specially responsible for what we *do*, rather than what we *allow to happen*? Are we specially responsible for what *we* do, rather than what *others* do, when we could have prevented them?

We might think that the difference in emphasis between these questions is important. We might think that the difference between what we do and what we allow isn't in itself be morally significant (so that I'm *just* as responsible for the baby's death if I don't pull it out of the bath when it slips as when I push it under), but that we cannot be held *as* accountable for the actions of others that we fail to prevent as for our own actions.

Williams:

“Discussions of [these cases] will have to take seriously the distinction between my killing someone, and its coming about because of what I do that someone else kills them: a distinction based, not so much on the distinction between action and inaction, as on the distinction between my projects and someone else's projects.” (p. 363)

But is this right? Does it matter, for example, to the question of whether I ought to send money for famine relief if that famine was the result of drought or government graft?

Also, might a consequentialist stand by (1) and (2), and explain our differing reactions to, e.g., Pedro and Jim differently? We might, e.g., think that Jim's act is *as wrong as* Pedro's but that Jim is less blameworthy, because he acts from less bad motives.

(3) Consequentialism/Utilitarianism threatens to alienate us from the projects that most define us:

Williams:

“It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimistic decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which *his* actions and *his* decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the

projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, and attack on his integrity.” (p. 363)

What do you think of this? Might we not sometimes be required, by morality, to sacrifice projects that are extremely important to us? And is it reasonable to have a powerful objection to killing people that is not based on a powerful objection to their being killed?
Questions:

Are the cases of Jim and George different in important ways? Are our intuitions about them different?

Can the utilitarian explain some of our uncertainty about how Jim and George should act from within the utilitarian framework (e.g. by considering long-term effects, or the effects on George and Jim)? What about a different kind of consequentialist? Relatedly, should a utilitarian take into account the value or disvalue of feelings which are from the utilitarian perspective irrational, or which result from irrational (value) judgments? (It seems to me certainly not!) Also, does the “precedence effect” have weight only if we assume that others will follow our lead even when doing so is *not* justified by the utilitarian calculus?

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