

Williams; A Critique of Utilitarianism

I. Williams starts by saying that utilitarianism, since it only cares about consequences of actions, doesn't care about *how* the act was brought about. So there's no distinction between, say

1. Agent X doing an act Y because X freely wanted to do Y
2. Agent Z forcing X to do Y, since X didn't want to do Y
3. Agent X accidentally doing Y

And there shouldn't be a distinction between them, because all the utilitarian cares about is does Y bring about the greatest happiness overall, or not?

So it's not important whether X wanted to do Y, did Y on purpose, did Y because he/she was forced to do so, etc. All that matters are the consequences of doing Y.

II. Williams states that utilitarianism must contain what he calls a doctrine of *negative responsibility*.

What this means is this: let's say that in a specific situation I can do X or Y. X brings about the greatest happiness. Y is basically doing nothing (which is an option). I choose Y. Since Y does not bring about the greatest happiness, I am blameworthy.

So a utilitarian must say that just as I am responsible for the things that I *do*, I must also be responsible for the consequences of the things I *don't* do. In this case I should have done X, but I didn't. I did Y, which was to do nothing. So I failed to bring about the greatest happiness.

Another way to look at negative responsibility:

Jim and the Indians situation.

A man says to Jim: if you shoot one Indian, I will let the other 9 live. If you refuse to shoot the 1 Indian, then I will kill all of them.

So here's Jim's options

Do X: shoot the one Indian. Seems to bring about the best consequences, since the other 9 live.

Do Y: refuse to shoot the Indian. Seems to bring about the worst consequences, since all 10 will die.

If Jim chooses Y, then it seems that he is *negatively* responsible for the deaths of the 10 Indians. After all, it is his choice that results in their deaths, no? So in this case it would seem that Jim should be held responsible for the consequences of his inaction.

III. Williams thinks something is amiss here. The utilitarian will hold Jim responsible for the deaths of the Indians if he chooses act Y. In other words, a utilitarian will say that Jim *ought* to have chosen act X.

Williams thinks something is wrong here, and it has to do with what he was talking about in (I).

There's got to be a difference, Williams says, between the acts that I *do* and the acts that someone else does.

In the Indian case, *Jim* didn't shoot the Indians. Pedro did. So it is hard to see (1) where Jim is really responsible for the deaths.

Moreover, as Williams will argue later, it is hard to understand why Jim *ought* to do X instead of Y. Williams argument here will have to do with *integrity*. He thinks integrity is important, and he says that utilitarians don't care about it, but should. I'll talk about this in a minute. First let's look at the first problem, that Williams thinks Jim isn't really responsible.

TWO KINDS OF REMOTER EFFECT

First, Williams says there is a difference between

1. My projects
2. The projects of others

Second, Williams says that there are psychological effects on agents. This refers to:

1. What sort of effect will it have on Jim to choose X (shoot the Indian)?

Obviously, if Jim thinks murder is wrong, choosing X will have serious effects on him psychologically. The utilitarian, of course, will say that this might be irrelevant. The harm done to Jim is outweighed by the benefits produced (saving the lives of the other 9 Indians).

So a utilitarian, Williams says, will say that the fact that Jim feels bad because he shot the Indian is irrational. It is irrational because the act *isn't* bad at all. It brought about the best consequences. In fact, a utilitarian will say that if Jim refuses to shoot, he is indulging in the worst kind of selfishness (he could save 9 people's lives, but refuses to because it will make him feel bad).

Williams's first response to this:

1. We are not all utilitarians. Only if Jim were a utilitarian could he be called selfish in this way.
2. Utilitarians seem to want to distance us from our moral feelings. In other words, if Jim feels bad, he should discount this feeling as irrelevant. But Williams says that he should not—it is of the utmost importance to give weight to moral feelings, especially when you are in a situation like this one, where Jim will simply not be able to live with himself for doing X.
3. So a utilitarian says that we should give NO weight to our moral feelings at all. All that matters are consequences. Williams thinks this is absurd.

Williams counterexample:

There is a small minority in a country. The majority doesn't like the minority. They are prejudiced against them. So they decide it would be best to wipe them out. Of course, the feelings of the minority are against it, they think it is unjust, and so on. But it could be possible that wiping out the minority (if it is sufficiently small in number) might actually bring about the greatest consequences.

So the feelings of injustice harbored by the minority are irrelevant. In fact, they are IRRATIONAL. The feelings of the minority, after all, are that the best act should not be done (which is wiping them out). These feelings are irrational because they are not in accord with what actually is the best act (wiping them out will bring better consequences). So their feelings about injustice are discounted, and they are wiped out.

Williams thinks this must be wrong.

INTEGRITY

First Williams shows that Jim is not responsible for the deaths of the Indians if he refuses to shoot. Williams says that a utilitarian says

If I know that if I do X, result A will happen, and
If I know that if I don't do X, result B will happen,

and if B is worse than A (in consequences), and I choose A, then I am blameworthy according to a utilitarian. I am blameworthy because I should have chosen B.

Williams say: but what if B happens *through another agent*?

This is the situation with Jim.

If he doesn't shoot, the result is that the Indians will die. Sure, but what ACTUALLY results is that

Pedro will kill the Indians

So Williams says there is a difference between Jim not shooting and

1. Ten Indians winding up dead

and

2. Pedro killing the ten Indians.

Williams point here is that Jim himself did not *make* the situation happen that the Indians would die. Pedro did. Pedro had a choice he could have killed the Indians and could have let them live regardless of what Jim did. Pedro could not have said Jim, you have refused, and in doing so *have left me with no alternative* but to kill the Indians. Of course he has another alternative. He could choose not to shoot the Indians. So Pedro is responsible, not Jim.

To say that Jim is the cause of the deaths of the Indians is to leave Pedro out of the story altogether. It would be as if Pedro didn't exist at all, and Jim directly caused the deaths. But Pedro is an important part of the story.

So utilitarianism has to recognize the difference between ME doing something directly (shooting the Indians) and SOMEONE ELSE doing something (Pedro shooting them).

SECOND ARGUMENT: INTEGRITY

Now Williams argues that Jim shouldn't shoot the Indian at all.

Everyone has projects. This means that we all have goals we want to fulfill. Some of them are short term. I have a goal right now of finishing up these notes and posting them up on the web. Some are long term, say you want to become an engineer one day. Some are deep-set, what Williams calls *commitments*. These are plans or projects that are integral to *who you are*, the person you have strived all your life to be. The types of long term and short term projects I just listed don't count as commitments.

A commitment would be something like: all my life I have strived to be the kind of person that respects all life, and I would never kill another thing. I don't even step on ants.

Why does Williams make the distinction? Because he thinks that sometimes it does make sense to alter your long and short term projects because it would be better. So if someone was outside getting mugged right now, I should stop writing these notes and go help. If my becoming an engineer would mean that my kids (if I had them) would not be able to go to school, maybe I should think about doing something else.

But should I discard my commitments because someone ELSE S projects are such that discarding my commitments will frustrate their projects, which lead to unhappiness?

In other words, say Jim shares the commitment that he respects all life, and he always has. Pedro s short term project is to kill some Indians. Clearly this is something, according to a utilitarian, that should be frustrated.

Should Jim discard his commitment to frustrate Pedro?

Williams says no. This would mean that Jim would have to be prepared at the drop of a hat to sacrifice his integrity (his commitments) every time another agent s projects called for him to do so (like in the Pedro case).

Williams point here is rather simple. He asks what does it mean to *be* an agent, or to *be* an individual? For Williams, an integral part of what it means to be an agent or individual is to have the sorts of moral feelings one has. And one has those feelings because one has spent a lifetime cultivating them and following them.

To separate a person from his own moral feelings is to claim that agents are irrelevant, or to deny what is essential to *being a person*.

So, just because consequences would work out better, we cannot demand that an agent distance himself from his own moral feelings, like the utilitarian does in the Jim and Pedro case.

INTEGRITY or living your life in such a way that you act in accord with your commitments or moral feelings, is too valuable to simply give up.

Any system (like utilitarianism) that tells you that integrity is not important denies what is most important about individuals. So such a system has serious problems, if not altogether wrong.