

PHI 202 | Study questions 5

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Readings: Williams, B. (1973). A Critique of Utilitarianism.

The central case

(a) Which actions are intuitively required, permissible, and impermissible in the following cases?

Jim and the villagers: Jim is on a botanic expedition when he finds himself in the central square of a village. 20 innocent villagers are about to be executed by the local army in response to the recent protest. The captain makes Jim the following offer. If Jim agrees to kill 1 of the villagers, 19 will be spared. If Jim refuses, all 20 will be shot by one of the soldiers, Pedro. The villagers understand their situation and are begging Jim to accept.

(b) What answer does utilitarianism give in this case? Does Williams dispute this answer? If not, what does he take an issue with?

Some interesting features

(a) Compare *Jim and the villagers* with the following case:

Framing: A sheriff foresees that unless he frames and hangs a person whom he knows to be innocent, an angry mob will go on a rampage and kill 20 other innocent people who fit the profile of the suspect.

(b) If Jim does not kill one of the villagers, the same person and 19 others will be killed. Why is this feature important? What is (weak and strong) *Pareto* superiority?

(c) The villagers understand their situation and are begging Jim to accept. Why is this important?

(d) Suppose Jim agrees to killing one of the villagers. How should he decide whom to kill? Is there any way to ensure some kind of equality?

Utilitarianism alienates people from their (moral) emotions

(a) Suppose that you were in Jim's situation. Regardless of what you would choose to do, would it be an easy choice? Would you have after-thoughts?

(b) For a utilitarian, the decision to kill one villager should be an *obvious* one: one of the outcomes is clearly better than another. But as the response to the previous question illustrates, most of us would feel various emotions. Suppose that we could choose not to have these emotions. What would utilitarianism recommend in this case?

(c) Williams makes the following objection in connection to this. Can you explain it?

"Because our moral relation to the world is partly given by such feelings, and by a sense of what we can or cannot 'live with', to come to regard those feelings from a purely utilitarian point of view, as happenings outside of one's moral self, is to lose a sense of one's moral identity; to lose, in the most literal way, one's integrity" (p. 104).

(d) Does this objection apply only to utilitarianism and consequentialism more generally, or also to non-consequentialist moral theories?

Two faces of impartiality

(a) Utilitarianism is *in one way impartial*. As long as the benefits and harms are the same, it does not matter *who receives them*. So, for instance, the utilitarian will be indifferent between giving Bob 20 units of well-being and giving Cath 20 units of well-being. Can you recall some of the objections to utilitarianism connected to this idea?

(b) Williams observes that consequentialism in general is also *in another way impartial*. As long as the benefits and harms are the same, it does not matter *who produces them*. For instance, what would utilitarianism recommend in the following case?

Jim 2: The captain makes Jim the following offer. If Jim shoots one villager, the others will be spared. If Jim refuses, then Pedro will shoot one villager and others will be spared.

(c) This second face of impartiality implies what Williams *the Doctrine of Negative Responsibility* Can you explain it and show how it applies to *Jim and the villagers*? (Hint: see p. 108).

The Doctrine of Negative Responsibility and intervening agency

(a) Williams argues that there is a morally relevant difference between two ways in which an outcome can come about. What is it? He writes:

"While the deaths, and the killings, may be the outcome of Jim's refusal, it is misleading to think ... of Jim's having an *effect* on the world through the medium ... of Pedro's acts ... it is more revealing to think in terms of the effects of Pedro's projects on Jim's decisions" (p. 109)

(b) To what extent is it different from the distinction between killing and letting die?

Utilitarianism alienates people from their actions

(a) Suppose that Jim is a committed pacifist. Would that make any substantial difference to what utilitarianism asks him to do in *Jim and the villagers*?

(b) Williams argues that utilitarianism prevents an agent from having any *genuine* commitments. What is his argument? (Hint: it is very similar to Stocker's argument that utilitarianism prevents an agent from having any genuine relationships.)

(c) Why would the impossibility of having any genuine commitments be bad? How does it connect to the idea of *integrity*?

(d) Does it count against a theory that in extreme circumstances it requires us to give up our personal commitments?

Further questions

(a) The other case used by Williams is that of George who decides whether to accept a job at a company which pursues research into biological and chemical warfare. In the first precept, we talked a bit about effective altruism and the ethical questions related to career choice. What bearing do the arguments offered by Williams have on these issues?