

## *Williams on Utilitarianism*

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*October 1, 2014*

### *What is Utilitarianism?*

We can break the view up into parts.

- **CONSEQUENTIALISM:** You morally ought to  $\phi$  just in case the complete world-history that would result were you to  $\phi$  has greater value than any of the complete world-histories that would result were you perform a different available action.
- **VALUE CLAIM (HEDONISM):** The value of a complete world-history is determined by the total amount of net *happiness* it contains. Happiness is the only thing of *intrinsic, non-instrumental* value.

Everyone's happiness counts for the same. The distribution of happiness doesn't matter.

The *good* is prior to the *right*.

### *Williams' Examples: George and Jim*

Williams gives two problem cases for Utilitarianism.

- **George.** George is offered a job, which he really needs, for a company whose research will be used to create biological/chemical weapons. George opposes such weapons. But if he doesn't take the job, someone else will.
- **Jim.** Jim faces an awful choice: either kill an innocent person himself, or stand by while another person kills several more people. Jim does not want to kill the innocent person. But if he doesn't, many more innocent people will die.

It looks like Utilitarianism recommends taking the job, in the first case, and killing the innocent man, in the second.

George ought to *take the job* just in case, were he to do so, the resulting complete world-history would have more value than the complete world-history that would result were he to *not take the job*. And it seems true that it would. So he ought to take the job.

(*Mutatis mutandis* for Jim.)

Is this right? What could be said on behalf of the Utilitarian?

*Issues These Cases Raise*

1. **Doing vs Allowing.** Consequentialism doesn't recognize a morally significant distinction between *doing* something and *allowing* something to happen.

THE DOCTRINE OF NEGATIVE RESPONSIBILITY: If I know that if I do X,  $O_1$  will eventuate, and if I refrain from doing X,  $O_2$  will, and that  $O_2$  is worse than  $O_1$ , then I am responsible for  $O_2$  if I refrain from doing X.

2. **My Doing vs Your Doing.** Consequentialism doesn't recognize a morally significant distinction between what *I do* and what I fail to prevent *others from doing*.

3. **Alienation.** Williams says:

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 optimific 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, an attack on his integrity.* (pg, 363)

The worry is that Utilitarianism alienates us from our actions, commitments, and projects.

**Question:** Is Williams right that Utilitarianism is alienating? What does he mean? If so, does this provide us with a reason to reject Utilitarianism?

What, exactly, is Williams' thought here? Can we turn this into an argument against Utilitarianism? Is the objection just that Utilitarian morality is too demanding?