

# BERNARD WILLIAMS

## Against Utilitarianism

Bernard Williams, a British philosopher born in 1929, has written important works in ethics and philosophy of mind. Those include *Problems of the Self*, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, and *Shame and Necessity*. This selection is taken from his criticism of utilitarianism in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, co-authored with J. J. C. Smart.

Williams argues that utilitarianism, when applied to certain cases, has implications that clash strongly with our intuitions about right and wrong. He further argues that a utilitarian cannot effectively appeal to "remote effects" to avoid these counter-intuitive implications.

As you read the selection, ask yourself whether utilitarianism has the implications that Williams claims about his two cases. Can utilitarians avoid these implications by appealing to remote effects?

### Two examples

Let us look at two examples, to see what utilitarianism might say about them.

(1) George, who has just taken his Ph.D. in chemistry, finds it difficult to get a job. He is not robust in health, which cuts down the number of jobs he might be able to do. His wife has to work, which causes a great deal of strain, since they have small children. The results of all this, especially on the children, are damaging. An older chemist says that he can get George a decently paid job in a laboratory which pursues research into chemical warfare. George says that he cannot accept this, since he is opposed to chemical warfare. The older man replies that he is not too keen on it himself, but George's refusal is not going to make the job or the laboratory go away; what is more, if George refuses the job, it will certainly go to a contemporary of George's who is not inhibited by such scruples and is likely to push the research with greater zeal than George would. What should George do?

(2) Jim finds himself in the central square of a small South American town. Tied up against the wall are a row of twenty Indians, most terrified. A heavy man in a khaki shirt turns out to be the captain in charge and explains that the Indians are a random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of

protest against the government, are about to be killed to remind other possible protesters of the advantages of not protesting. However, since Jim is an honored visitor from another land, the captain is happy to offer him a guest's privilege of killing one of the Indians himself. If Jim accepts, then the other Indians will be let off. If Jim refuses, then Pedro will kill them all. The men against the wall, and the other villagers, understand the situation, and are begging him to accept. What should he do?

To these dilemmas, utilitarianism replies, in the first case, that George should accept the job, and in the second, that Jim should kill the Indian. Not only does utilitarianism give these answers but, if there are no further special factors, it regards them as *obviously* the right answers. But many of us would certainly wonder whether, in (1), that could possibly be the right answer; and in the case of (2), even one who came to think that was the answer, might well wonder whether it was obviously the answer. Nor is it just a question of the rightness or obviousness of these answers; it is also a question of what sort of considerations come into finding the answer. Utilitarianism cuts out the idea that each of us is specially responsible for what *he* does, rather than for what other people do. This is an idea closely connected with the value of integrity. It is often suspected that utilitarianism makes integrity as a value more or less unintelligible.

### Remote effects

We should first ask whether we are assuming too hastily what the utilitarian answers to the dilemmas will be. In terms of more remote effects, counter-weights might be found to enter the utilitarian scales. Thus the effect on George of a decision to take the job might be invoked, or its effect on others who might know of his decision. Such effects are often invoked by utilitarian writers dealing with lying or promise-breaking, and similar considerations might be invoked here.

The certainty that attaches to these hypotheses about possible effects is usually pretty low; in some cases, the hypothesis is so implausible that it would scarcely pass if it were not being used to deliver the respectable moral answer, as in the standard fantasy that one of the effects of telling a particular lie is to weaken the disposition of the world at large to tell the truth.

### Effects on the agent

I want to consider two types of effect that are often invoked by utilitarians. First, there is the psychological effect on the agent. Our descriptions have not taken account of how George or Jim will be after they have taken the one

course or the other; it might be that if they take the course which seemed at first the utilitarian one, the effects on them will be bad enough to cancel out the initial utilitarian advantages of that course. Now there is one version of this effect in which some confusion must be involved, namely that in which the agent feels bad, his subsequent conduct and relations are crippled and so on, *because he thinks that he has done the wrong thing* – for if the balance of outcomes was as it appeared to be *before* invoking this effect, then he has not (from the utilitarian view) done the wrong thing. So such feelings, which are from a utilitarian view irrational, cannot, consistently, have any great weight in a utilitarian calculation. I shall consider in a moment an argument to suggest that they should have no weight at all. But short of that, the utilitarian could reasonably say that such feelings should not be encouraged and that to give them a lot of weight is to encourage them. Or, at the very best, their weight must be small: they are after all one man's feelings.

There is a powerful appeal that can be made on this point: that a refusal by Jim to do what he has been invited to do would be a self-indulgent squeamishness. The "squeamishness" appeal is not an argument which adds a hitherto neglected consideration. Rather, it is an invitation to consider the situation, and one's own feelings, from a utilitarian view. If one is really going to regard one's feelings from a strictly utilitarian view, Jim should give very little weight to his.

There is an argument, and a strong one, that a utilitarian should give not merely small weight to feelings of this kind, but that he should give absolutely no weight to them. This is based on the point that if a course of action is, before taking these sorts of feelings into account, utilitarianly preferable, then bad feelings about that kind of action will be from a utilitarian view irrational. Now it might be thought that even if that is so, it would not mean that in a utilitarian calculation such feelings should not be taken into account. While a utilitarian will no doubt seek to diminish the incidence of feelings which are utilitarianly irrational, he might be expected to take them into account while they exist. This is classical utilitarian doctrine, but there is good reason to think that utilitarianism cannot stick to it without embracing results which are startlingly unacceptable and perhaps self-defeating.

Suppose that there is in a certain society a racial minority. Considering merely the ordinary interests of the other citizens, as opposed to their sentiments, this minority does no particular harm. Its presence is in those terms neutral or mildly beneficial. However, the other citizens have such prejudices that they find this group very disagreeable. Proposals are made for removing this minority. If we assume various quite plausible things (as that programs to change the majority sentiment are likely to be ineffective) then even if the removal would be unpleasant for the minority, a utilitarian calculation might well end up favoring this step, especially if the minority

were a rather small minority and the majority were made very severely uncomfortable by the presence of the minority.

A utilitarian might find that conclusion embarrassing; and not merely because of its nature, but because of the grounds on which it is reached. He might wonder whether the unpleasant experiences of the prejudiced people should be allowed, *merely as such*, to count. If he does count them, then he has once more separated himself from a body of ordinary moral thought which he might have hoped to accommodate; he may also have started on the path of defeating his own view of things. These sentiments are from the utilitarian view irrational, and a thoroughly utilitarian person would either not have them, or if he found that he did have them, would seek to discount them. Since the sentiments are such that a rational utilitarian would discount them in himself, it is reasonable to suppose that he should discount them in his calculations about society.

## The precedent effect

The psychological effect on the agent was the first of two general effects considered by utilitarians. The second is the *precedent effect*. This effect can be important: that one morally *can* do what someone has actually done, is a psychologically effective principle, if not a deontically valid one.

For the precedent effect to make a difference to a utilitarian calculation, it must be based upon a confusion. Suppose that there is an act which would be the best in the circumstances, except that doing it will encourage by precedent other people to do things which will not be the best things to do. Then the situation of those other people must be relevantly different from that of the original agent. But if the situations are relevantly different, it must be a confused perception which takes the first situation as an adequate precedent for the second.

However, the fact that the precedent effect is based on a confusion, does not mean that it is not perfectly real, nor that it is to be discounted. What it does emphasize is that calculations of the precedent effect have to be realistic. In the present examples, it is implausible to think that the precedent effect could be invoked to make any difference. Jim's case is extraordinary, and it is hard to imagine who the recipients of the effect might be supposed to be; while George is not in a sufficiently public situation for the question to arise, and in any case one might suppose that the motivations of others on such an issue were quite likely to be fixed one way or another already.

No appeal, then, to these other effects is going to make a difference to what the utilitarian will decide about our examples.

## Study questions

- 1 Explain the examples of George and Jim. How does Williams use these to argue that utilitarianism has counter-intuitive results?
- 2 Identify and explain the two remote effects that Williams examines. How might utilitarians use these to try to avoid the counter-intuitive results?
- 3 Explain why, according to Williams, the appeal to remote effects fails to avoid the counter-intuitive results.
- 4 Construct an example of your own where utilitarianism seems to have counter-intuitive results. How might utilitarians try to use remote effects to avoid the counter-intuitive results? How would Williams argue that the appeal to remote effects doesn't avoid these results?
- 5 What is the "precedent effect"? Though based on a confusion, why is it nonetheless, according to Williams, not to be discounted?

## For further study

This selection has excerpts, sometimes simplified in wording, from Bernard Williams's *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pages 96–107; this book was co-authored with J. J. C. Smart. For more on Williams's view, see that work and his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) examines utilitarianism in Chapter 10.

Related readings in this anthology include Brandt, Mill, Singer, and Smart (who defend versions of utilitarianism); and Finnis, O'Neill, Rawls, Ross, and Slote (who criticize utilitarianism).

RICHARD B. BRANDT

## Rule Utilitarianism

Richard B. Brandt, an American philosopher who lived from 1910 to 1997, contributed to various areas of moral philosophy, including the ideal observer view, the theory of rational desires, cross-cultural ethical studies, and utilitarianism. He introduced the distinction between act- and rule-utilitarianism.

Act-utilitarians apply the utility test to individual actions. For example, I ought to lie if this individual act would have the best consequences. Brandt instead proposes that we apply the utility test to moral *rules*. The rules about lying that we should follow are those whose acceptance by society would have the best consequences. This shift would likely bring stricter guidelines and results that harmonize better with common sense.

As you read the selection, ask yourself if you find Brandt's approach plausible. Does he give strong objections to act-utilitarianism? Does his rule-utilitarianism avoid the objections? Does it accord better with our moral intuitions?

## Act and rule utilitarianism

"Act-utilitarianism" holds that the rightness of an act is fixed by the utility of *its* consequences, as compared with those of other acts the agent might perform instead. Act-utilitarianism is an atomistic theory: the value of the effects of a single act on the world is decisive for its rightness. "Rule-utilitarianism," in contrast, applies to views according to which the rightness of an act is not fixed by *its* relative utility, but by conformity with general rules; the correctness of these rules is fixed by the utility of their general acceptance. Rule-utilitarianism is an organic theory: the rightness of individual acts can be ascertained only by assessing a whole social policy.

Act-utilitarianism has implications difficult to accept. It implies that if you have employed a boy to mow your lawn and he has finished the job and asks for his pay, you should pay him what you promised only if you cannot find a better use for your money. When you bring home your monthly pay-check, you should use it to support your family and yourself only if it cannot be used more effectively to supply the needs of others. If your father is ill and