

Reading Guide #11

Parfit, *From Reasons and Persons* (in packet, p.132-159 internal)

Williams, *A Critique of Utilitarianism* (in packet, p. 611- 621)

1. On page 133, Parfit says, "Consequentialism covers, not just acts and outcomes, but also desires, dispositions, beliefs, emotions, the color of our eyes, the climate, and everything else. More exactly, C covers anything that could make outcomes better or worse." Suppose that we take Utilitarianism as our form of Consequentialism. According to Utilitarianism then, when should a mother have the *disposition* of love towards her child? When should I have the *belief* that $2 + 2 = 4$? When should I have the *belief* that $2 + 2 = 5$?

2. Suppose that Grace really loves her daughter Samantha. Now suppose further that Samantha is not doing too well in English and Grace wants to use some of her extra income to hire a tutor. Finally, imagine that this money could also be sent to some very worthy charity which would save the actual lives of some children much poorer than Grace and Sammy. Suppose that Grace gives the money to Samantha's tutor, explain why according to Parfit this act is 1) wrong but 2) blameless. [Hint: Parfit says that actions are blamelessly wrong under very specific circumstances. What are these?]

3. What is a pure do-gooder, and why does Parfit think that the existence of enough pure do-gooders might lead to the conclusion that Consequentialism is indirectly collectively self-defeating?

4. According to Parfit, if we can show that Consequentialism is indirectly self-defeating does that mean that Consequentialism is false? Explain why or why not?

5. According to Williams, many have thought that absolutism (my term not Williams') is the only alternative to Consequentialism, whereas Williams himself thinks that there is a way to reject Consequentialism without adopting the absolutist position. The absolutist argues that Consequentialism is false because there are some actions that one should always do whatever the consequences. Whereas Williams argues that "with respect to some type of action, there are some situations in which that would be the right thing to do, even though the state of affairs produced by one's doing that would be worse than some other state of affairs.." (p. 609-610). Explain, in your own words, the difference between the two positions.

6. Williams provides (p. 612-613) two examples of situations that are supposedly problematic for Utilitarianism. Briefly explain these two situations.

7. Now explain why Williams thinks that in both of the examples from #6 Utilitarianism conflicts with common sense. [NOTE: the answer is NOT that Utilitarianism says that George should take the job whereas commonsense says that he should not and that Utilitarianism says that Jim should take Pedro's offer whereas common sense says that he should not. Read the paragraph starting (613) "To these dilemmas..." Utilitarianism and common sense disagree not necessarily about what to do (at the end of the article he says that Utilitarianism and common sense actually agree about Jim and Pedro), but they disagree about something else. What is it?]

8. What, according to Williams, is a project? What sorts of things can it include? Can it include a reference to non-egoistic things?

9. Why does he think that it cannot be true, even for a Utilitarian, that the only project that we have is to promote the general good.

10. At the end of the article, Williams suggests that Utilitarianism forces agents to regard even their deepest convictions and projects with a certain amount of detachment. They must be able to drop them at the drop of a hat. Why does Utilitarianism demand this?