Utilitarianism and Obviousness

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This article seeks to diagnose a serious defect in a highly influential supposed counterexample to utilitarianism: Bernard Williams's case of Jim and the Indians. Discussing this, Williams argues that, according to utilitarianism, it is obviously right to say that Jim should kill an Indian. But as this is not obviously right, Williams takes the example to furnish a forceful counterexample to utilitarianism. I note here that the force of the supposed counterexample is in fact very doubtful as the utilitarian can readily enough explain the non-obviousness of the claim that Jim should kill with reference to the non-obviousness of utilitarianism itself.

Perhaps the most discussed example in contemporary moral philosophy is Bernard Williams's of Jim and the Indians. In case anyone still has not heard, Jim happens on a scene of imminent carnage. Ten innocent Indians are about to be unjustly shot dead. But Jim has a chance to save almost all of them. If he shoots one himself, he is told, the others will be released. The example is paired with that of George, a scientist, morally opposed to chemical and biological warfare but desperate for work, who is offered a job in that field and reliably given to understand that if he does not take the job it will be taken by someone else who will apply himself to it with some zeal.

   Williams makes a number of interesting and important points about these cases, but his primary observation is as follows:

To these dilemmas, it seems to me that utilitarianism replies, in the first case, that George should accept the job, and in the second case, that Jim should kill the Indian. Not only does utilitarianism give these answers but, if the situations are essentially as described and there are no further special factors, it regards them, it seems to me, as *obviously* the right answers. But many of us would certainly wonder whether, in (1) [George] that could possibly be the right answer at all; and in the case of (2) [Jim], even one who came to think that perhaps that was the answer, might well wonder whether it was obviously the answer.[1]

The point is echoed in more recent anti-utilitarian writing. Thus Christine Korsgaard: 'Utilitarians are committed to the view that it

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[1] Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge, 1973), p. 99. It is important to bear in mind that Williams is here discussing act-utilitarianism (his preferred terminology is 'direct utilitarianism': ibid., pp. 79–81). For less direct forms of utilitarianism there may of course be nothing even prima facie obvious about what we should do in such a case.

is obvious that Jim should kill an Indian, but few people can imagine themselves in Jim's position without some sense of a dilemma.'[2]

In the case of George the argument in the offing is a simple one: Plausibly George should not take the job, but utilitarianism appears to imply that he should, so utilitarianism must be mistaken. With Jim the point appears to be subtler: Utilitarianism must be mistaken because it is not *obvious* that Jim should kill the Indian and utilitarianism implies otherwise.

While the point about George is a telling one, the point about Jim, while subtle, is surely not effective. Certainly what Williams says does suggest an argument with what would be widely accepted as true premisses:

A A1: It is obviously the case that if utilitarianism is true then Jim should shoot an Indian.

 A2: It is not obviously the case that Jim should shoot an Indian. Therefore: A3: Utilitarianism is not true.

The premisses would be widely accepted as true, but A is invalid. Compare the following.

D D1: It is obviously the case that if Daisy is in love with you then she often thinks about you.

 D2: It is not obviously the case that Daisy often thinks about you. Therefore: D3: It is not the case that Daisy is in love with you.

It may indeed be obvious that if Daisy is in love with you then she often thinks about you and it may indeed be unobvious that she often thinks about you. However, the reason it is unobvious that Daisy often thinks of you may be, in part, precisely because it is far from obvious that she is in love with you. And what obviously follows from the unobvious may very readily itself be unobvious.

Suppose we were to supplement A1 with the further premiss:

 A1.5: Utilitarianism, if true, is obviously true.

From the obvious truth of utilitarianism and the obviousness of its entailing that Jim should shoot an Indian we could perhaps safely enough infer that Jim should obviously shoot an Indian. Given that the latter is not obvious, we could turn the argument around to conclude that utilitarianism is not obviously true and hence, given 1.5, that it is

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[2] Christine M. Korsgaard, 'The Reasons We Can Share: An Attack on the Distinction Between Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Values', in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 293.

false. Such an argument would presuppose the soundness of reasoning as follows:

> Obviously: p.
> Obviously: if p then q.
> Therefore: Obviously: q.

This is not logically valid of course. Obviousness is not closed under obvious entailment. What follows by obvious steps of reasoning from obvious premises is not always obvious. One way in which formal theories aspire to be interesting is of course by taking us from obvious axioms and obvious inference rules to unobvious theorems. But when the reasoning is a single simple case of *modus ponens* as in the present case, the obviousness of both conditional and antecedent is fairly taken to give strong, if not logically compelling, support to the supposed obviousness of the consequent.

However A1.5 is false. We may very safely say that, even if utilitarianism is true, it is certainly not obviously so. After all, a good many very able philosophers, such as Williams and Korsgaard, believe it to be false and this is unsurprising not least in the light of such at least apparently telling counterexamples as that supplied by George.

What Williams says also suggests another argument, which *is* straightforwardly formally valid.

> B B1: If utilitarianism is true then it is obviously the case that Jim
>   should shoot an Indian.
>   B2: It is not obviously the case that Jim should shoot an Indian.
>   Therefore: B3: Utilitarianism is not true.

B is valid, but its first premiss, B1, is *not* plausibly true, at least if we understand the conditional as of a kind that would be open to falsification by the salient *possibility* that the antecedent is true and the consequent false.[3] So understood, B is vulnerable to the very same counterexample that spoke against the validity of A. For we can readily envisage a circumstance in which utilitarianism is true but it is not obvious that Jim should kill an Indian, namely that in which, while utilitarianism is true, it is not obviously so. And, as I have already noted, utilitarianism, if true, is certainly not obviously so.

If, as his wording perhaps suggests, Williams indeed intends B rather than A, he would have a valid argument but not a sound one, as there

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[3] Of course, if instead it were read simply as a material conditional it would suffice for its truth that utilitarianism is – as both Williams and I believe – false. But if we were to take that to be what makes B1 true, the argument would be rendered sound but trivial.

is no reason to accept B1. There is a claim about what is obvious in the offing here that would be widely accepted as true but that claim is A1, not B1. And A1 does not combine with A2 to offer a valid argument against utilitarianism.

Because B1 is false we should reject Korsgaard's claim that 'Utilitarians are committed to the view that it is obvious that Jim should kill an Indian.' Utilitarians can grant that this is not obvious and explain its non-obviousness very readily with reference to the non-obviousness of utilitarianism itself.

Indeed, utilitarians should grant that it is unobvious that Jim should kill for a further reason. I granted above that A1 would be widely accepted as true. Nonetheless, I believe that even A1 is false. Certainly it may well seem prima facie plausible that from the truth of utilitarianism the conclusion that Jim should kill an Indian obviously follows, especially if we suppose that 'the situations are essentially as described and there are no further special factors'. In fact, however, even this is not remotely obvious unless we make the fantastically unrealistic assumption that the survival or death of the various Indians is the *whole story* about the consequences of Jim's possible action or inaction. A real headache for utilitarianism is that, in any real case of this sort, in which many lives are at stake, any such assumption is certain to be false in such a way that the theory offers not only no obvious guidance but effectively no guidance at all as to what we should do. That, however, is another, much longer, story and one I have told elsewhere.[4]

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