

*What is 'integrity'? Does utilitarianism threaten it? Is that a bad thing?*

1. **No**, utilitarianism does not threaten integrity, though careless definitions of either term might lead one to mistakenly conclude that it does. In this essay, I will show that integrity is entirely consistent with correctly practised act-utilitarian moral frameworks when it is understood as it ought to be: the quality of acting in line with one's deeply-held beliefs and values. As part of this, I demonstrate that purported alternative notions of integrity which give an absolute priority to autonomy and independence are incompatible with any kind of social morality and should be set aside entirely. Finally, I argue there is a false assumption behind the titular question – that one can non-circularly assess the truth of moral propositions – and that this leads to more fundamental difficulties with attempts to evaluate ethical theories.
2. Before arriving at my definition of integrity, we will first examine another view, to bring out the contrast between the two and highlight why the alternative is a flawed characterisation. Williams argues that integrity is about autonomy: an agent must be permitted to make decisions on the basis of their own projects and commitments, and not morally obligated to take a particular action as a result of other individuals' choices (p116-7). On this view, integrity of the self is tied up with personal identity. Each agent is uniquely themselves precisely because they have their own projects and commitments which are not to be externally interfered with. This concern is also seen in the importance Rawls places on the separateness of persons, **arguing that some facets of identity are so important that we cannot ask one individual to sacrifice them for the greater good** (p24). However, this proves too much: if agents must always be permitted to remain committed to their own ground projects, then all notions of universal moral obligations disappear completely. For any such posited duty, one could always come up with an agent whose ground projects conflict with it, thereby (according to Williams) rendering the duty invalid. An insistence on this kind of integrity must therefore wrongly restrict us only to relativist or egoistic forms of morality. **Defining integrity as the quality of generally acting in line with one's deeply-held beliefs and values allows us to avoid this conclusion. There is no reason to insist that agents must always act in accordance with their values in order to possess identity, and integrity therefore does not have a veto over moral obligations.**
3. Williams might reply that utilitarianism is incompatible even with this modified conception of integrity, because its joint doctrine of impartiality and **negative responsibility** requires so much of agents that they would constantly be obligated to perform welfare-maximising acts and would never have the opportunity to fulfill their deeply-held beliefs and values. But the most deeply-held belief for a utilitarian is that they have a moral obligation to impartially maximise utility. Acting towards that goal is therefore clearly not a challenge to their integrity. This analysis helps us interpret our intuitions in response to Williams's famous thought experiments more clearly. Take the case of George, a pacifist chemist who cannot decide whether to take up a job overseeing weapons production in order that he could slow the process down. If George were a utilitarian then his pacifism would be merely instrumental, and he could accept the post without threatening his integrity (indeed, not accepting the post would run counter to it). If George were not a utilitarian, then of course the utilitarian course of action **might clash with his beliefs and values** – but on its own, this tells us nothing about whether or not George *ought* to be a utilitarian, let alone if utilitarianism is correct.
4. Perhaps George and others like him would be catastrophically disadvantaged in some way if they were all utilitarian, showing that the moral theory cannot be universally correct. As part of his argument that utilitarianism is "absurd" as a sole fundamental value (p116), Williams claims that a world comprising only of utilitarians would be devoid of value even on a utilitarian account, **as there would be no way to endogenously induce welfare amongst agents whose individual wellbeing is determined only by the total utility.**
5. However, if any possible worlds contain moral value, then those inhabited solely by perfect utilitarians must contain value – otherwise welfare would not be being maximised. More specifically, if an absence

of non-utilitarian ground-level projects really would lead to less happiness or, as Williams outlandishly claims, no agents at all (p110-112), our utilitarian actors would simply adopt some such projects to avoid that outcome. Railton (p143) terms this “sophisticated” hedonism, but it in reality it is simply non-naïve hedonism, and directly analogous to how actual utilitarians adopt rules and heuristics where useful, through multilevel consequentialism (Crisp p143).

6. We can generalise this response to deal with other extensional criticisms. A utilitarian would argue that, by definition, nothing utilitarianism recommends (or more precisely, no action performed by a rational perfectly utilitarian agent) can be “a bad thing”:

**P1** A moral theory  $T$  says that an agent should take action  $A$  (e.g. having only utilitarianism as a deeply-held value) in a context  $C$ .

**P2** It would have been bad in a utilitarian sense for the agent to have taken this action  $A$  given  $C$ .

**P2\*** There existed another action  $A'$  (e.g. having additional deeply-held values) available in  $C$  which, if taken, would have produced more aggregate welfare.

**C**  $T$  cannot be an act-utilitarian theory, because it does recommend agents take actions in line with the act-utilitarian criterion of rightness.

7. The above argument demonstrates that utilitarianism can, and will, absorb any other theory if doing so would increase welfare. However, this should not be conflated with an ability of utilitarianism to accommodate multiple sources of ultimate value, as Railton does (p148-50). Valuing something only in virtue of its producing another desirable object is the very definition of instrumentalism (Crisp p144): if the additional deeply-held values did not in actuality lead to greater welfare, then the utilitarian would abandon them. This exposes a broader problem in ethics. By what lights can we judge some effect to be a bad thing, except the lights that we trying to show are the correct, undistorting ones that ought to function as our criterion of rightness? No adherent of any moral theory would accept that their framework omits what matters or promotes what is wrong, as otherwise they would subscribe to another. It is perfectly possible for several internally consistent theories to exist, and for us to have no way of judging between them besides our subjective intuitions.
8. To conclude, integrity is the quality of acting in line with one’s deeply-held beliefs and values, and I do not believe it is threatened by utilitarianism. As I have shown above, we should reject absolutist definitions of integrity as identity, as they are not compatible with any commonsense notions of morality. There is ample space for integrity as I define it within act-utilitarianism – and indeed, that theory would actively embrace it if necessary to achieve utilitarian goals. However, the fact that it remains an open question whether threatening integrity is a bad thing or not illustrates perfectly a more fundamental difficulty in ethics: our inability to agree on axiomatic propositions upon which moral theories can build.

## References

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