

24.231 Ethics – Handout 19 Bernard Williams, “The Idea of Equality”

A descriptive claim: All men are equal.

A normative conclusion: Therefore we should treat men as equals.

I. What should we make of the descriptive claim?

- There are many respects (skill, intelligence, strength, virtue...) in which men are not equal.
- All men – that is, all people – are equally men – that is, equally human. But that seems too trivial a claim to bear the weight of the argument.

Is the claim “all men are equally men” trivial?

- It’s a way of drawing attention to the features which all people, as equal members of the species, *share*: capacity to feel (both physical and psychological) *pain*; capacity to feel *affection* for others; desire for *self-respect*: “to be identified with what one is doing, to be able to realize purposes of one’s own, and not to be the instrument of another’s will unless one has willingly accepted such a role.” (p. 234)
 - *What other possibly morally significant characteristics do all men share?*

What can be gained from drawing attention to such shared features? Perhaps those who wish to treat some groups of men differently from others don’t deny these *shared* characteristics, but take unshared characteristics (e.g., being black) as providing a moral reason for unequal treatment.

- Williams: “The principle that men should be differentially treated in respect of welfare merely on grounds of their colour is not a special sort of moral principle, but (if anything) a purely arbitrary assertion of will.” (p. 233)
- Williams: This point is conceded by those who practice color discrimination, who don’t offer “they’re black, and the color of their skin, *per se*, justifies treating them differently” as a justification, but instead offer rationalizations based on supposedly descriptive claims with regard to lack of intelligence, sensitivity, or responsibility. (p. 233)
- Williams: “the rationaliser broadly agrees with others about what counts as [a moral reason] – the trouble with him is that his reasons are dictated by his policies, and not conversely.” (p. 233)
 - *What makes a decision principle, or a reason, a moral one? What makes a consideration count as a reason at all, moral or otherwise?*

II. Are men equal, and owed an equal *respect*, in their *capacity as rational and moral agents*?

- In one sense, it is clear that not all men are equal in their capacity as rational agents, or their (related) moral responsibility for their actions. Contingent, empirical considerations can clearly affect the degree to which different people are responsible for their actions.
- Williams: But there may be a related respect in which all men, as rational agents, are owed equal respect. We're all conscious beings with a *point of view* on our own roles; we're not just miners or laborers or executives, who fulfill a certain function – we're also people for whom there's something it's like to be fulfill that function.
- Respecting people as people requires regarding them not merely under professional, social, or technical titles – often the bearers of inequality – but with consideration of their own views and purposes: it involves recognizing that people are equals despite differences in their social stations, and allowing this recognition to guide our interactions with others.

III. Equality in unequal circumstances: what does it mean to say that equal treatment is required with regard to questions of distribution of goods where people's *inequalities* are clearly relevant?

Inequality of need

Test case: Healthcare

- Healthcare should, of course, not be distributed to all people equally, regardless of *need*. But it should be distributed to all *equally needy* people equally, regardless of, for example, wealth.
- This represents a strengthening of the weak principle from which Williams began: that for every difference in the way men are treated, a *reason* should be given, and the reason must be *relevant*
- Williams argues that “it is a matter of logic that particular sorts of needs constitute a reason for receiving particular goods”:
- Williams' argument:
 - (1) The reasons that ground our decisions about how to distribute a good should reflect our reasons for providing the good in the first place.
 - (2) In the case of healthcare, our reasons for providing the good is medical need: that it makes sick people well.
 - (3) So our distribution of healthcare should be based on medical need – who is sick and needs to be made well.
- Worries about Williams' argument (partly due to Nozick):
 - (i) We might question premise (2): of course, one reason we provide medical care is that there is medical need. But doctors and nurses also provide medical care in order to earn a living. From their perspective, then, ability of patients to pay for care looks like a relevant reason to ground distribution.

- Replies?

- (ii) We might question premise (1): does it generalize? It seems to implausibly imply that, e.g., barbers should distribute haircuts on the basis of need for haircuts, or landscapers should mow lawns on the basis of lawns' need for being mowed.

- Replies?

Inequality of merit

Test case: elite education

- Williams argues that in the case of good for which there is competition, and *merit* seems like a relevant consideration, it is still true that what constitutes the relevant sort of merit in such cases must be determined by the nature of the good to be distributed.
- Williams: “There is only a limited number of reason for which education could be regarded as a good, and a limited number of purposes which education could rationally be said to serve; and to the limitations on this question, their correspond limitations on the sorts of merit or personal characteristic which could be rationally cited as grounds of access to this good.” (p. 242)

Equality of Opportunity

- Some goods are desired by large numbers of people across all sections of society, are the kinds of goods which people may be said to earn or achieve, and are such that not all the people who desire them can have them.
- In such cases, the kind of equality we might aim to secure is *equality of opportunity*: the good can be allocated on grounds that do not *a priori* exclude anyone who desires it.
- But what constitutes *a priori* exclusion? “[Equality of opportunity] requires not merely that there should be no exclusion from access on grounds other than those appropriate or rational for the good in question, but that the grounds considered appropriate for the good should themselves be such that people from all sections of society have an equal chance of satisfying them.” (p. 244) (Grammar school, warrior class examples).
- It may not always be possible to secure such an equal chance, but equality of opportunity requires that *where unequal chances could be removed by reform or social action*, we do this.
 - Questions/further thoughts: Where should this process end? (If we can affect inborn inequalities in ability or intelligence at the beginning of life, either through genetic engineering or through sci-fi type operations on babies' brains, should we do so? Why or why not? What might guide us in where to draw the line?)

IV. Williams ends by pointing out that the two conceptions of what's involved in treating people equally that he has set out at least in practice (though perhaps not inevitably?) are in some tension with each other:

- (i) The first conception Williams discussed under the loose heading of *equal respect*: we should, in our interactions with others, “give less consideration to those

structures in which people enjoy status or prestige, and to consider people independently of those goods, on the distribution of which equality of opportunity precisely focuses our, and their, attention.” (p. 248)

- (ii) The second conception, which focuses on the *rational distribution* of goods according to relevant criteria, require us to focus on the importance to genuine equality of the very goods and privileges which the first conception advised us not to focus on. There is a real danger that a focus on securing equality of opportunity will lead us to overvalue such social goods in our assessment of what makes for a good life.

It seems to me we see this conflict playing out in our politics all the time: it's part of why the democrats, who are, often, more interested in securing equality of opportunity for such goods as healthcare, education, status, etc., are seen as “elitist” – as lacking respect for the equality we all have despite our differences...

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24.231 Ethics
Fall 2009

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