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A102 TV15

UTILITARIANISM:
A TUTORIAL WITH ROHAN COLLIER

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UTILITARIANISM: A TUTORIAL WITH
ROHAN COLLIER

Introduced by Stuart Brown

Stuart Brown

MS Stuart Brown

/Last week's programme consisted of a talk by Professor Bernard Williams. After the talk we had a lively discussion - you'll have a chance in this programme to see some parts of it. This programme

WS studio, Z/I to MS
Rohan Collier

however, is mainly a /tutorial which the students who were at Professor Williams' talk, discuss various points arising from it.

Leading the discussion is Dr Rohan Collier - an Open University tutor.

Rohan Collier

Right, now I hope you've all seen the lecture Bernard Williams gave, what I want to do, what I want us to do in this tutorial is to cover two things. I want us to try and see if we can get out of .

the lecture what the main issues were, and also, if we can discuss these issues. Doing those two things is really what philosophers do when they're doing philosophy, they try and find out the main /points on a particular issues, and

2S Gabriella & Eileen
pan R to 2S Eileen & Neil

discuss them, and assess them. So if we can do that in the tutorial, we'll be doing philosophy. Of course we /want to

MS Rohan

do something slightly more specific than doing philosophy we want to do moral philosophy. And if you remember from the units and from the /lecture that Bernard

2S Fred and Anne

Williams gave, there was a small definition of what moral philosophy might be, it would be something where we're trying to see the way we want to lead our /lives. Or the sort of life we would

MS Rohan

like to lead. So if we can aim our discussion towards answering those,

2S Sheena & Sylvestr

/that question, then we'll be doing moral

MS Rohan

philosophy. And /perhaps we could start by picking up one of the examples that Bernard Williams gave in his lecture, the example of the Hedon machine, and ask ourselves why we would or wouldn't like

to be plugged into the Hedon machine, and I think this might give us a way into moral philosophy; into seeing what the point of moral philosophy is, or what moral philosophy is about.

Anne West

MS Anne

/Didn't the Hedon machine actually give you pleasure all the time, but it might not necessarily be synonymous with

MS Rohan

actually being happy - because /happiness is not totally made up of pleasure. It

2S Anne & Sheena

would be /happiness - it might be pleasure, but you'd never know anything else.

Rohan Collier

Yes

Anne West

You'd lose your freedom, essentially, your own freedom to do what you want to do, when you want to do it.

Rohan Collier

MS Rohan

Yes, so you're /saying - there's two important things there, one is that happiness - it may be OK to accept happiness as the aim of moral philosophy or the way we're going to act - we're going to aim towards happiness, but what you've just said is that happiness can't just be pleasure, because that's not what

MS Anne

I /want, that's not going to make me happy.

Anne West

That's right.

Rohan Collier

And then also, the other thing you've said that perhaps we can come to later is that, there's not just that, I also /want to be free, and if I'm plugged into this machine, I'm not going to be able to be free.

MS Rohan

MS Gabriella /

Neil ClementsMS Rohan

But if /everybody's idea of happiness is

MS Neil

different, /does that really mean there's not really /such a thing as happiness, if it's different for everybody, then it's not really the same thing is it....

Rohan Collier

There's going to be no common; you're saying it's going to be difficult to find something in /common to all these happinesses that we can, which enables us to call them all happy, or happinesses if they're totally different.

MS RohanMS Neil /Fred Davies

I think the thing with the Hedon /machine, brings out very clear that the problem with Utilitarianism, trying to measure pain and pleasure on a sort of a scale like heat and cold, ah, it's hard to simplify what human reality is about, um, I don't know how you feel about it - but it means to me - happiness is not

MS Fred

something you can pursue as the American constitution says, you know, you can pursue happiness, I conceive that that is totally impossible... you can take an Open University course and you can achieve something, you get self-realisation and satisfaction and almost as a by-product, you achieve happiness. I find this idea of seeking pleasure as conceivable for seeking happiness, it's like a fools gold...

Rohan Collier

2S Sylvester & Rohan

So you - do you mean you /might actually be seeking something else, and with that happiness might ...

Sylvester Albioshu

... end result

Fred Davies

MS Fred

/...Precisely.

Rohan Collier

Yes, maybe the end result - without it being what you're aiming for necessarily.

MS Rohan

/Now we've seen the problems there are with the concept of happiness, generally, what do we mean by it - what problems will there be with calculating overall happiness - if we move on to that now, the other....

Eileen FoxMS Eileen

The /main problem I see with that is somehow having to quantify what might be very different values that people hold in relationship to one another.

Rohan Collier

Yes, that's - that's a very good point.

Sylvester AlbioshuMS Sylvester

So to /actually achieve happiness you've got to think about one variable and one variable at a time ...

Rohan Collier

Yes

Sylvester Albioshu

Not so many variables playing on each other to arrive at ...

Rohan Collier

MS Rohan

Yes, but don't you think that Eileen's point is that there /are different variables, that you can't just pick one.

Sylvester Albioshu

MS Sylvester

In that /case you are comparing likes with un-likes.

Rohan Collier

MS Rohan

I know this is the problem. /Yes, you're quite right, you can only do it by comparing like with like, you're right,

MS Sylvester

but the problem /is that we seem to have..

Sylvester Albioshu

... too many things playing ...

Rohan Collier

... we've got too many things, our lives are more complicated than just

MS Rohan happiness.../

Fred Davies

MS Fred Yes, but nevertheless, I'm /sure the Utilitarian answer to that would be, well, fine, I know there are problems - it's difficult, but we must attempt, we cannot achieve the perfection but we must attempt to approximate it - and all right it's - we're going to have apples and pears, but at least we'll, we'll try to

MS Rohan /maximise our distribution of them.

Anne West

MS Anne /Bentham said society was made up out of individuals and that the individual was important, and yet when you then look further into his philosophy, he then says the happiness of the greatest number, which seems to preclude the individual, and I'm just wondering whether he perhaps wanted the individual as a statistic rather than as a moral being with

feelings and sensations of its own,
rather than just one statistic making up
the big pool.

Rohan Collier

MS Rohan

I think you're absolutely /right

actually, that in his philosophy, the
individuals are just resources that they
enter into the calculation and was the
view Bernard Williams was hinting at I
think towards the end of his lecture and
the sort of view we've been talking about
now, is the view we'd want to make human
beings agents - /free agents - and not

MS Anne

just objects that you can dispense with,
as /with the operation, or enter into
calculations.

MS Rohan

Gabriella Wills

Yes, isn't that infact what we would

MS Gabriella

actually as /humans not like - the fact
/that this philosophy is very cold, very
cold and calculating.

Rohan Collier

Yes, the individuals disappear, don't they?

Gabriella Wills

Totally ...

Rohan Collier

Yes, you're right.

Neil Clements

pan R to Neil

You keep mentioning free agents - freedom of choice as being important in morality, but this raises all sorts of questions to philosophers I would have thought, as to analysing what freedom is, etc, Bentham would say there wasn't really any individual freedom, we're all individuals are determined by their environment and society, and in that case I would have said that there's no individual freedom...

Rohan Collier

Yes, you're showing now how all philosophical problems interlink, and

that's the free will problem that comes next in the course.

2S Sheena & Sylvester

/I think the point Bernard Williams was trying to make towards the end was that Utilitarianism is just, has just got this one view of happiness and it's too poor, I think the expression he uses is something like, it's too poor to satisfy

MS Fred

/our view of morality today and it would be better if Utilitarianism could help

MS Rohan

/itself to a few more ideas then perhaps we would be able to reach a view of morality that would satisfy, at least our society ...

From Bernard Williams' lecture...

Bernard Williams

MS Bernard Williams

/It has too few ideas to meet our needs.

WS studio

It only has the one ambiguous idea of welfare or happiness, and the /one inoperable idea of maximisation - those are its ideas. I think we need more

MS Bernard Williams

ideas than that, we /need as many ideas as we can lay our hands on....

Rohan CollierMS Rohan

/There was something else that was said in the um, in the programme and in the units when we've been talking about human rights - we're also talking about needs. Remember that its not just that each individual should be recognised and respected as an individual and a person - but also morality must take into account people's needs as well, and Bernard Williams was suggesting in his lecture that somehow needs couldn't be made important in a Utilitarian framework; that they couldn't be given priority.

(Fade to black)

"From the discussion after Bernard Williams's lecture..."

Ellie ChambersMS Ellie

/... infact if we leave all that aside, I was actually rather impressed by the arguments that you seem to me dismissed.

about Utilitarianism being able to talk about people's needs in the sense that Stuart Brown talks about in the unit as

MS Bernard Williams

needs being means to happiness. /So the

idea that unless one is, for example,

MS Ellie

housed, clothed, fed, um, then /you can't

talk about even the possibility of being happy.

Bernard Williams

Sure

Ellie Chambers

Now it seems to me that's a

justification of needs of Utilitarian

MS Bernard Williams

grounds, /not bringing in any other
principles, as you said before.

Bernard Williams

Sorry, thank you.

Ellie Chambers

So what's wrong with that?

Bernard Williams

Well, no, that's fine, I mean what that shows is that within a Utilitarian framework, you can define the notion of a need. /Er, that is to say that you can say there are certain /things that people want as a necessary condition of getting anything else they want.

MCU EllieMCU Bernard WilliamsEllie ChambersMCU Ellie

/Right...

Bernard Williams

Er, now, you can then refine that a bit, you can /start with a notion of simply what you want in order for anything that you arbitrarily happen to want, for instance, I need a bus ticket and I need a bus ticket because I want to get to the movies and I want to get to the movies simply because I want to go to the movies. Now that isn't, that isn't a bottom of the line need, that's just something I need for this arbitrary purpose, what we're going to define is the notion of something that I /need,

MCU Ellie

period. Something that's a need of mine.
 Now the notion of a need of mine in the
MCU Bernard Williams /Utilitarian context is the notion of
 something that I want as a necessary
 condition of wanting almost anything that
MCU Ellie a human being can want - /housing, life,
 health and so on, which can be called
 basic needs. I didn't say, at least I
MCU Bernard Williams /hope I didn't say, that a Utilitarian
 couldn't define the notion of that need.

Ellie Chambers

MCU Ellie No, /you said he couldn't justify it.

Bernard Williams

What I said was you couldn't justify the
priority of needs; because you see, all
 that'll follow from defining needs in
MCU Bernard Williams /Utilitarian terms is that the people who
 have those needs unsatisfied terribly
 much want those things - they have a very
 good reason for terribly much wanting
 those things - maybe they can't get
MCU Ellie anything else unless they /get them.

That gives a reason - suppose group A,
 some small group, has these needs - OK.

MCU Bernard Williams

Now it's /certainly true that A terribly
wants those things, now we have an

MCU Ellie

enormously much larger group B, who want
some non-neccessary /things. They all
want to get themselves another
wristwatch, which you can work out the
result of the cup final, or get minute
television sets, or whatever it is they
want. Now if there's enough of them, and

MCU Bernard Williams

/they've got so hooked on all these
consumer items and so on that they feel
frightfully disappointed if they don't
get them, what Utilitarian argument is
there for preferring the needs of a small
group to the non-necessary but intense
wants of a larger group.

Ellie Chambers

MCU Ellie

/Because you've, in Utilitarian terms,
justified those needs as, as being
heavily weighted.

Bernard Williams

No

Ellie Chambers

Why can't you do that, can't you...

Bernard Williams

MCU Bernard Williams

No, all I've shown is /that the, what A, the group A needs, it wants very much, that's all that Utilitarianism can give you. /And of course, the definition of a

MCU Ellie

need which Utilitarianism can offer or agree to, namely /what I need is what I want in order to want, in order to have anything else, will of course follow from that that anybody that has a need

MCU Bernard Williams

MS Studio

'terribly wants those things. /Now, it follows from that, that that will probably on any ordinary calculus outweigh alot of pretty trivial needs of quite alot of people. But /on

MCU Ellie

Utilitarianism, it's always an open question, /whether there may not be

MCU Bernard Williams

enough preferences of a sufficiently strong kind for non-need items as it were, among this other lot, which don't

MS Bernard Williams

satisfy this definition of a need /for it to outweigh the needs.

Fred DaviesMS Gred

/I mean it's obviously extremely difficult and very subjective, but surely we know the difference between a need and a preference, I mean there's this part of the English language, if we knew that someone had, needs a house and someone would prefer to have a luxury penthouse, we would know what we were talking about, it's a question of linguistics and if a proper Utilitarian calculus is made out, greater weight would be given to the need of a house rather than a luxury penthouse.

Rohan Collier2S Gabriella & Sylvester

Yes, how would that work - I mean how, I think you're right - yes /what criterion would you use to give greater weight to the need for a house on Utilitarian grounds.

Fred DaviesMS Fred

/Well, obviously we'd have to know the full circumstances of the two individuals

concerned, and you'd have to make a full analysis of the whole situation, but I'm saying that it isn't impossible, or at least it's difficult, but one should attempt it, and I don't think, I think the English language clearly states that that difference between need and preference, and merely to say that well, you know, somebody has a need and somebody has a preference, therefore Utilitarianism doesn't work.

Rohan Collier

Well, needs seem, you're saying needs, we know, we recognise that needs are much more important somehow than just preferences, but I think the point Bernard Williams was making in the lecture is that you could have a society where there are many many many of these preferences for ...

Sylvester Albioshu

.. to over-ride needs.

Rohan CollierMS Sylvester

Yes, to over-ride needs, and a few poor people who don't have their /basic house, well, tough on them, there are very few of them. But I still think - what could be... .

Fred DaviesMS Fred

Well, if you just /have sort of one person with a need and one person with a preference, the problem is much clearer, obviously for a Utilitarian - if we have the question of distribution within a society between minorities and majorities, you have a majority that is well off and a minority that's oppressed, and you say it's a just and good society according to Utilitarian rules, we probably wouldn't agree, at least not around this table - I would say there's something wrong with that society - we would say that the majority ought to do something for the minority - whatever - some type of distribution of income or wealth, or whatever.

Rohan Collier

Do you think Bernard Williams was right then saying that the Utilitarian can't prioritise needs, he can't account for needs being more important than other preferences, or do you think the Utilitarian can make out a case for needs being somehow more important, more essential than other preferences that seem trivial really perhaps, by comparison with basic needs, or basic rights...

Fred Davies

Well again it's got to be the quality of the pleasure you know, we're going right back to the problem of how do we measure pleasure, or measure happiness, make it even worse... how we measure /needs and preferences, very very difficult...

MS Sheena

Sheena Harland

That's what I meant earlier, when I said about the quality of happiness - some people who wanted some things very very much - if you add all those up they may

measure over 8, and the others may only measure 2 or 3 and there is no problem where there are equal numbers, it's where there are very unequal numbers where you might have a problem in deciding whether the preferences, or the needs as they should do, outweigh the preferences or in fact on Utilitarian grounds, the preferences by their sheer weight of numbers could carry the day.

Gabriella Wills

MS Gabriella

Could one overcome that slightly by /saying that, for instance in housing, somebody without a roof over his head, is obviously worse off than somebody who already has a house at least a roof over his head, so you can discount to a certain extent the man who isn't going to have rain pouring down over him and it would be very cold.

Rohan Collier

An awful lot of people aren't going to have rain pouring in, and only one poor person ... he, I think Sheena's point was

that he gets left out, and the overall calculation could be such a small...

Sylvester Albishu

MS Sylvester

That's the essence of the /principal,
isn't it?

Gabriella Wills

We're back to the minority.

Rohan Collier

Sorry?

Sylvester Albioshu

That's the essence of the principle - of
the greatest number of ... the greatest
happiness of the greatest number.

Rohan Collier

That's right, the problem is that you are
calculating overall happiness aren't you
- you're maximising happiness, but what
you could do is to re-state
Utilitarianism as Stuart Brown does in

the units. Towards the end of the units, Stuart Brown gives a re, re-stated view of Utilitarianism, when he says something like this - well as I

MS Rohan

understand it, that /instead of looking at a way of maximising happiness, and says that Utilitarianism should maximise happiness, we could say that it should maximise the number of people that can attain happiness so we're getting people back into the picture, and saying, let's start with people and trying to get the greatest number of people who are going to reach happiness, and if you do that, you've got to take account, yes, the person who doesn't have a roof over his head, then you can get /needs into the picture.

2S Sheena & Sylvester

Sheena Harland

Don't reach stage 2 until everybody's got stage 1.

Rohan Collier

MS Rohan

Yes, right, it's a /way - Stuart Brown calls it bottom loaded Utilitarianism, or

2S Sheena & Sylvester something like that - you've got to have
/stage 1 first.

MS Rohan /It would be a very watered down
Utilitarianism - it would be a new kind
of Utilitarianism, but it may be a way in
which Utilitarianism can be, I don't want
to say saved so much, but can take
account of the things we feel are
important.

Gabriella Wills

... in modern day..

Rohan Collier

Modern day Utilitarianism...

Neil Clements

MS Neil I was going to say we talk about basic
needs and perhaps they should be
/satisfied before we go on to anything
else, but again basic needs seems to
alter from century to century and country
to country - we would regard running
water as a basic need, but 200 years ago
that would be a luxury.

Rohan Collier

Yes, you're absolutely right, it would make Utilitarianism a much more cultural dependent thing than it had been before because it's just going to depend on that you count as basic needs, and you're right - they're going to vary from culture to culture, century to century.

MS Arne

So /what do you think, to try, what can we say in favour of Utilitarianism then, finally, just try to find something positive that can be said, or has been said...

Sylvester Albioshu

MS Sylvester

You might say .../

Rohan Collier

... or that it has achieved.

Gabriella Wills

MS Sheena

Well, /it was the basis, after all, for

2S Gabriella & Eileen

our welfare /state.

Rohan Collier

Yes, I think that's true, this again is something that was, that's in the units, and was discussed in the lecture that Utilitarianism by taking into account everyone's happiness has been the basis of the welfare state.

From the discussion after Bernard Williams' lecture....

Gabriella Wills

MS Studio /Wouldn't you say that however, one of the benefits of Utilitarianism bringing it into modern era is really the basis for the Welfare /state.

Bernard Williams

MCU Bernard Williams Yes, certainly. Utilitarianism /as I said, I mean I have said that it's a, I've been very critical in some ways of Utilitarianism that's certainly true, but nobody can deny that the Utilitarian spirit has produced many valuable reforms and it's certainly /made a large contribution to the development of

MCU Gabriella

Welfare thought in Britain, and in fact it's made a contribution to development to welfare thought everywhere, but I

MCU Bernard Williams

/think it is worth saying, as an historical fact that there is, it is rather a cultural peculiarity of Britain that it's welfare thoughts are so strongly Utilitarian - I mean

MCU Gabriella

/Utilitarianism is a very British

MCU Bernard Williams

philosophy, /and you'll get defences or justifications of programs for welfare legislation of at least comparable character in other countries where although of course, general utility is an important part of it, and indeed it's not an accident that these are called welfare programs and welfare is itself a Utilitarian concept, while this is so, a wider range of concepts in terms of rights, or a life worth living or people's interests, or needs again, maybe

MCU Gabriella

invoke rather /more than straight utility. But, one's got to remember what a terribly powerfully Utilitarian country this is, I mean the public philosophy of Britian is Utilitarianism qualified by

MCU Gabreilla

bloody-mindedness roughly. /And, it's a good job it is qualified by

bloody-mindedness, but it doesn't make it theoretically very based, but I think

MS Bernard Williams

it's a part of the fact that people hate theoretical abstractions in England, they

somehow think that the idea of making

people better off all round is a very

untheoretical practical notion, of

course, what they don't realise is how

much theoretical complication is wrapped

up in it. And, a very interesting

example just today, as I was driving

here, on the radio, a question was raised

about the employment of private security

firms to look after the factories and so

on in a certain town in the north, but I

don't want to go into the issues of that

particular matter, but there was a

representative of a security firm who was

being questioned, and the interviewer put

the obvious points that some people are

afraid that there may be a kind of

vigilante thing, a kind of unofficial

police, people having rights to go into

premises and so on, which they perhaps

wouldn't want anybody but the police to have. What do you think of these objections? And his answer, which was absolutely sincere, was "well, I think everybody's got to agree that when there's a lot of crime around; everybody's going to be better off if we have this than if we don't". It was an absolute straight Utilitarian answer to a

MCU Gabriella

/didn't deny that it stopped break-ins, stopped breaks-in, break-ins, and vandalism and so on, what the interviewer was saying was /that maybe it's a threat

2S Anne & Fred

to people's rights, of privacy or

MS Bernard Williams

legalised power, but the /man who'd answered the question - it had never occurred to him, and I think that was partly because he was in England. So, we tend to identify welfare, and welfare

2S Neil & Eileen

programs and the welfare state /very powerfully with Utilitarianism which in historical terms in England is correct, but to some extent it's a little bit of a

WS Studio

local peculiarity I think. /You know there's a wonderful remark of Nietzsche's

about Utilitarianism - he said "humanity doesn't pursue humanity", he said "only the Englishman does that".

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