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A102 TV14

UTILITARIANISM - A LECTURE BY BERNARD WILLIAMS

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UTILITARIANISM - A LECTURE BY
BERNARD WILLIAMS

Stuart Brown:

MS Stuart Brown

/The first part of the Introduction to
Philosophy in A102 is on Utilitarianism.
In the early nineteenth century,
Utilitarianism became a controversial
philosophy, but in spite of its
difficulties, it's become, and perhaps
remains; a highly influential way of
thinking about moral questions. Today it
has its critics, and its defenders. And

MS Bernard Williams

one of its leading /critics is Professor
Bernard Williams, Provost of Kings College,

WS studio

Cambridge. /We are very grateful to
Bernard Williams for agreeing to come and
give us his views on Utilitarianism.

Bernard WilliamsMS Bernard Williams

/The people who formulated Utilitarianism in the nineteenth century, who Stuart referred to, such as Jeremy Bentham, put the doctrine in a very simple form that the criterion of what we ought to do is simply that which produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Now this philosophy has had, I think, a chequered history since then - in some ways, it's now even more popular than it was in the Victorian era. I suppose because of the decline of religious belief for one thing, and the departure of certain old received standards, it satisfies the search for a kind of rational basis of morality which people can understand and as they hope, apply. But at the same time, though it has that kind of wind behind it, it's also I

think met with a lot of distrust. Now, some of that distrust is due to the fact that in a way it isn't really put into practice; then people say they are putting it into practice of course, and say they are appealing to the greatest happiness of the greatest number, that often isn't what they are doing, they're often simply putting in a /system which appeals to the greatest happiness of a rather few number of people, namely the ones who are running society or doing well out of it. Now I think that's some of the criticism for instance that Dickens was making through the character of Gradgrind, but I think a lot of the worries about it are that even if you did put it into practice, it would be a pretty alarming system, that the idea of having society run in this efficient way

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to produce the greatest happiness for the
greatest number might in fact lead to a

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kind of oppression or paternalism. /There

is something to be worried about here;

people are disquieted about the Utilitarian

approach, yet at the same time I think a

lot of people feel that it's somehow the

only rational way that we can have of

grounding public morality, perhaps even our

private moral sentiments, in the modern

world. And as I say, at the same time,

they're worried about it. Well, I think we

ought to try and see what reasons are going

for it and also what sort of reasons there

are for feeling a disquiet or anxiety about

it.

Now one of the claims that Utilitarianism

has always made is that it's a kind of

definite scientific system, that traditional systems of values or appeals of virtues or duties or whatever are somehow vague or unsatisfactory or don't lead to determinate results. And the great virtue of Utilitarianism is supposed to be that it does give you a definite result. Well one question we have to ask is "does it?" Now the slogan was, you remember, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. At least that was the original slogan. Now one of the things we have to ask is - "what's happiness?" - what counts as happiness for these purposes? Now for Jeremy Bentham and the early Utilitarians such as James Mill, John Stuart Mill's father, to some extent for John Stuart Mill himself, happiness meant pleasure in the absence of pain. But if it strictly means pleasure, simply

nothing but pleasure, then its very doubtful that most people think that the maximisation of pleasure, having as much pleasure as possible all round the place, is the aim of human life. It isn't even I think what most of us want for ourselves. Suppose somebody invented the "Hedon Machine", the Hedon Machine you can imagine is something like a hairdryer attached to it such that if you plug yourself into it, you put your head inside this thing and connect it to the mains, it fills you with delicious and variagated sensations forever; you lie there in this machine totally zonked out while delicious experiences race through you. Now, if you were given the choice of this, would you want to join yourself up to it? /Now it seems to me an awful lot of people would

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say "no", that is not a life for a human being. Now /I don't believe that's because they somehow think, you know, duties would be neglected, indeed at the end there wouldn't even be anybody to provide the power to run the machine, I mean that's a relevant consideration, but we are not asking that, we're not asking that, we're asking "would you want it for yourself?" - and I think most people, at least quite a lot of people would say they wouldn't want it for themselves, that's not their view of what a human life should be and I think we should bear that fact in mind.

Well nowadays people don't talk so much in terms of pleasure for Utilitarianism or even happiness, they talk more in terms of Utility or Welfare, to use the Economist

term. Well what do they mean by this?

Well sometimes they simply means what people choose, what people, given the chance, choose. This is what the economists call "revealed preferences", and they say that what the aim of social or moral theory should be is to give people as much of what they want in those terms, in terms of revealed preferences. But of course we all know that what you choose may not be what you really want. That's a very familiar factor - in fact for a great deal of time, people are always choosing things they don't really most want. One reason for this, the simplest reason, is that they suffer from factual error, they choose some for instance, patent medicine - they choose it all right, but they don't in the end really want it because they /falsely

believe it's gong to do them some good - in fact it's no use at all.

MS Bernard Williams

Well somebody might say /"is what we really

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want what we would enjoy if we got it?" /Is

it enough to say that if we'd enjoy it if we got it, that means it's what we basically or really want? Well surely not.

MS Bernard Williams

/Consider the old pleasure machine again,

which I've just referred to, the Hedon Machine. If you plugged yourself into it, if you did that, you'd be frightfully satisfied. If they sent a message in to your doped state and said "How do you like it?" you say "wonderful, wonderful, it's absolutely marvellous." They say, "Do you want to go out and do something else, work for politics, listen to concerts?", "Oh no, it's wonderful in here, thank you". Would

that tell you that that's what they really wanted? Now, of course it wouldn't because you know it's an effect of being in this state that it makes you like it. Another example of that is brain-washing. Young people often get caught up in some, or sometimes get caught up in religious groups or some sort of extreme group which takes them over, gives them some tremendous psychological treatment, after which they say "We want nothing better than to belong to this group". But people; their parents for instance, don't think that proves that's what they want, they say "They've been made to want it by belonging to it", and if you've been made to want it by belonging to it that doesn't prove that it's what you really or most basically want.

Well there's a lot of notions here.

There's the notion for instance of what you choose; individual preference, what you want, what you would want if you were better informed, what would make you better off, what's in your interests, and last of all perhaps, what suits your needs. Now all of these are notions we use when we are thinking about ideas like happiness. It's very important which of these sorts of notions /Utilitarianism, which is just

CU student

interested in increasing happiness, really wants to adopt. And in /fact I think

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historically there have always been two strains of Utilitarianism and there still are. There's what might be called "the hard headed factual" strain which says; doesn't matter all about all this fancy

stuff about interests or needs or what people really want, we'll just give people what they actually prefer, let's just stick to the facts. That's the Utilitarianism of social surveys, consumer research, just going by what people say - away with all these manipulative and so on ideologies. So that's what you might call the "hard headed factual" strain of it. The other strain in it is that really the Utilitarian administrator knows what's best for people. They've got an idea of what it would be like, what people would want if they were better informed and free from confusion and that sort of Utilitarian tends to correct people's preferences. It says, we won't just take them as they are expressed in choice or preference, what we'll do is from social science or other

sources, work out what's best for people. And that tends to lead to a kind of paternalistic management of society on the other hand. Now we'll come back to that. There are two political strains in Utilitarianism, one is a kind of consumer democracy; the other is a kind of paternalist management and they jostle with each other, one goes into focus when the other comes into focus when the other goes out and that's /because they play with the concept of happiness, between these two extremes, a lot of the time. What we've got to realise is that there's more than one concept of happiness here.

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/Well I said there were quite a lot of problems even in the old formula so there's some problems in the term "happiness" in

the formula "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". Now the other, one of the other classical sorts of problem concerns what's meant by "The greatest happiness of the greatest number". What is it to maximise happiness, what is it to come to that even to increase it? Well we have one fairly simple criterion which is sometimes used and as far as it goes it's not bad. You've made things better if you've made some people better off and nobody worse off. Well, if you can produce a situation in which you've made some people better off and nobody worse off you are doing quite well, but of course in most social situations that isn't, it isn't as easy as that. When you make some people better off you make some other people worse off, almost always, and so what

Utilitarianism or any calculations of welfare and utility are stuck with is

MCU one of tutors

/trying to think about how you, as it were,

MS Bernard Williams

lay off the increase for some people. /For

instance, am I going to be so much more advantaged by getting these books to read as compared with the loss to somebody who has to pay taxes to support the universities or something of that kind and perhaps cannot buy so much food for their children, how do we compare these kinds of welfare calculations. This has always been a great problem for this kind of thought.

BCU Student

/Now the Utilitarians will say, quite

rightly, that this is a problem for

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everyone; /everyone has to take this sort

of thing into calculation they are going to

think about these things sensibly, and

they're right, they're right. Everbody, these difficulties are to some extent difficulties for everybody. The peculiarity of Utilitarianism is that it tries to think about these things simply by using the notions of welfare; that is utility, preference, happiness, whatever those notions are talking about, and maximising. They're the only notions they want to use and the fact is that using these two very difficult notions by themselves in my view just makes everything harder than it would be if you helped yourself to a rather wider range of notions.

Now there are some more problems that Utilitarianism runs into, and I'll mention a couple of them quite briefly here. One

is, as I have already implied really - because Utilitarianism only adds up and compares welfare, it doesn't have any special place for the kinds of preference which we might call a need. Some of our preferences we, in our ordinary thought, think of as being more basic than others. Peoples' preferences for basic housing, for having a family they can keep together, for food, for a decent measure of privacy. We feel in a way that's so basic we call them human needs. Now our notion of needs is relative, nobody will deny that, it's relative to the kind of society the degree of development, the kind of economic development society showed. What's a necessity in one place is perhaps not a necessity in another place, and so on. But we have this category. For Util... -

because we have this category some of us think that it's more important to meet these basic needs before you go on to meet other things that are mere preferences. Utilitarianism doesn't, at a basic level, care about that. It simply says they're all preferences of the other sort, if there's enough people who have got preferences of the other sort that will outweigh the needs of a small group of people. You've just got to add up and put in the severity. I think some people think that needs has a kind of moral claim over /mere preferences. And that's one notion which Utilitarianism finds it very very difficult to represent in its thinking.

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MCU Bernard Williams

/The second sort of difficulty which has always plagued them is the question of what

might be called "second order" preferences; preferences about other people's preferences. For instance, I've just said and I'm sure a lot of people agree with me, I don't know whether you agree with me, but quite a lot of people would agree with me that needs ought to be given priority, that they count more than just ordinary preferences. That has various political consequences. I think that, perhaps because I have certain moral or political views which make me in favour of satisfying people's needs. Some people have them, just through kind of sympathy, that is they feel identified with the needs of people who are in want. Now, so we perhaps have the second order preferences to the effect that these other people's needs ought to be met. Does the Utilitarian count them or

not? Does he count second order preferences? And that's quite a nitty question. If he does count them of course that gets his position nearer to everybody else's position because he can then put in the preferences for needs as one of the items in the mix. But I wonder if he should? One thing, he's almost doing a kind of double-counting. He's counting the people with the needs preference first, then he's counting our sympathetic preference for those people again so, as it were, those need people come in twice into the sum.

2S students

/I think that these considerations show

that in a way Utilitarianism, as I

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suggested at the beginning, is /very

ambiguously related to democracy. On the

one hand it's got a rather democratic element in it. Bentham said "each person was to count as one and only one" and that /means that built into it is a kind of equality, meant - you certainly was opposed to sort of vested rights of the aristocracy or vested rights of a privileged class in that sense, I mean he was, in that sense it was a contribution to modern social thought. But of course that remark that they are going to count as one and only one is a remark about how they are going to be counted, not who's going to do the counting. And at the same time, Bentham and the early Utilitarians and many of their followers really think in terms of things like central agencies to put all these preferences together, an enormous amount of information about people's

preferences and social science applied to their dispositions and so on, and this means that somewhere in the middle there is going to be a system for adding the preferences together in one way or other which certainly won't give everyone what he or she wants. And of course if we have the bit which I mentioned before about not simply giving preferences as they are given but improving them, then of course this central agency is going to be pretty paternalistic as well. So in one way it is a bit democratic but I think that the democratic strain, its confines simply to majoritarianism, it's simply that it involves adding up as large a coincidence of preferences as well. If you think that democracy's got something to do with self-government for instance, still more if you

think it's got something to do with minority, then Utilitarianism isn't the philosophy for you. It's actually more concerned with efficient management of majority preferences, than it is with self-government or the representation of minority rights, which it's not particularly good at.

Well now, granted that Utilitarianism has all these difficulties which I've mentioned and there are many more of course which have been much discussed in the years since it was first formulated - why does it have the /appeal that it does? Well I

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think one thing we have to say just in passing is it's important that it isn't a religious or transcendental philosophy,

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/it's a secular philosophy, it's very

firmly this worldly and I think that's a requirement which many people make of a philosophy for a modern state. In fact it's a requirement that a lot of religious people make of the philosophy for a modern state. A lot of religious people don't think that the public philosophy of our society should be itself religious, they think that religion is a very proper thing in its own sphere, but that, as it were, we are having a pluralist and secular state which you can't build in religious principles into the foundation of things, so of course a secular philosophy is desirable.

Another thing, is that it's one way of interpreting the idea of a pluralist society where people have very different

and manifold opinions of various kinds.

One thing about Utilitarianism is that it seems to be a kind of minimum commitment philosophy. It seems to be just based on one thing we can all agree about which is making people happier. The trouble is that it isn't as simple as that. When we think about questions we have a plurality of moral questions; we have a plurality of reasons, a lot of different reasons, in private we think in terms of duties, or virtues or what makes somebody a decent person; in public we think in terms of such things as preserving the environment, or thinking about endangered species or about social justice, which are not obviously Utilitarian ideas, er, all of them. And general happiness is one notion we use among others. But once we have to start

talking in public to rationalize our decisions and explain them to everybody, then of course we, looks as if we want a common currency within which various claims and various ideas can be compared and Utility looks like the one common currency we can all agree on. That's why it is an important system, it seems to meet this need in a modern society. /But of course if

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it's important in that sense so are the objections to it. And we've got to

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remember that; /the criticism I made at the beginning, that first - we don't actually agree that some very simple notion of preference maximisation is the one thing that matters. We think very much in terms of interests and needs and justice and a range of notions which aren't simply Utilitarian preference maximisation, so it

isn't simply true that we all agree on this notion of maximising happiness in this

3S students and one of tutors simple sense. /Moreover we don't all agree

that the claims or rights of minorities simply don't count in order to add into maximum preference satisfaction. We

MS Bernard Williams sometimes think that /we don't care a damn

about increasing the satisfaction of the majority of people if it involves sacrificing the legitimate rights of some group. We have notions of defensible justifiable rights of a minority, and this is one of the ideas we have too. It is no good saying even because we disagree about what those are, we've all got to fall back on this one notion of preference maximisation, 'cos it's the one currency we can all get our hands on. On the addition factor again it's a lot of this stuff about

adding up preferences, adding up happiness so as to maximise it, are actually when you come to look at it a fair degree of bluff.

But when people try to do it on a social scale they are not really doing that. They are taking a lot of things for granted.

They are actually using a lot of familiar values when they come to these situations and as it were pretending to do a sum or kidding themselves that they are doing a sum when they are not really doing that.

It's wrong to think of the way in which we take the various claims we use in political or social thought together to think of that as just a calculative or addition process.

It can never be that, it's always going to be a political process. It's going to be a process that's going to involve waiving;

putting some claims against others are recognising at the end of the line there may be some judgements of priority or importance which we cannot totally rationalize. Not I don't think when we talk about Utilitarianism that we should think of it as we were discussing simply the timeless truth of some moral systems as

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/if it were somehow written in the galaxy what the true moral system was and we are trying to find out what the truth is. I

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think what we are /trying to do, we're all trying to do, Utilitarians included, is to arrive at the most sensible judgement of a public morality to suit the peculiar needs of a modern society. The modern society is very complex, if it has many opinions in it, it also has a quite peculiar demand to understand what it is doing . It's a very

great mark of modern societies that they want to try to understand what they are up to, they're not content with mystification or mere myths or obscurity any more.

Utilitarianism tried to meet that demand, it's an attempt at the public morality for a modern society and it has an honourable history as trying to meet that demand, but my own belief is, that it never can meet because in the end it has too few ideas to meet our needs. 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 ideas than that, we need

as many ideas as we can lay our hands on
and I don't think we want them as tied up
with ideals of pontification and trying to
add things together as Utilitarianism
always has been.

Thank you.

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