



Repatriation and the returning of remains

Encountering a body - Audio

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My object is Jeremy Bentham, who was the founder of Utilitarianism – the principle of maximising happiness for the greatest number of people a great movement in philosophy – and bizarrely he became an auto-icon after his death.

His body was dissected in public; a lecture was delivered over his opened body by his friend who was a doctor, who undertook to enact the terms of the will. His head was preserved and mummified, unfortunately not very successfully, and it wasn't really recognisable so it has been replaced by a wax head. And then the skeleton was reconstructed and dressed with Bentham's own clothes, and he was put into a pose that's supposed to be the kind of pose that he was in when he was thinking in the process of writing. And he's there with his favourite walking stick and his glasses.

Jeremy Bentham is really unusual in that he gave explicit consent in his will, in fact he demanded in his will, that he should be put on display like this. But usually when bodies and body parts appear in museums, it's not even with implicit consent.

So, for instance, we look at the case of the Torres Straits Islanders, whose skulls and jawbones were until recently owned by the Natural History Museum. These were there not with the consent of the people who died, and modern-day descendants of these islanders are absolutely explicit that these objects are sacred, and they have actually campaigned to have them returned to the ancestral islands where they are going to be treated with the appropriate respect.

As a philosopher, I'm really interested in the issues that arise about the ownership and display of not just body parts but objects generally in museums, because there's a whole underlying theoretical issue about: what are museums for; whose rights should prevail in questions where there's a conflict of rights? The people who maybe rightfully own the objects, the nations from which the objects originated, or perhaps nobody should be looking at body parts? These are really philosophical questions, moral questions, about how we should live and how we should treat the dead, how we should respect objects, how we should weigh the wishes of the dead against the wishes of the living.