TORBJORN TANNSJO

THE LEAST SUB-NOTICEABLE DIFFERENCE

1. INTRODUCTION

Our moral sensibility has evolved in societies where the impact of our actions has been restricted. Today many people feel that the kind of sensibility we have developed in this kind of settings is inadequate. Our actions have a very different import in a modern society, and this import must be taken into moral account. We sometimes cause serious harm, not because of what individually we do, but because of what we do together with other people. And sometimes we cause serious harm, not in any noticeable way, but perhaps still in a morally important way, since many people are each being affected negatively (in a not noticeable way) by what we do. And in some other cases, we have a combination of this. We cause a not noticeable harm to some person, and so do many other persons. Together the harm we all cause to this person is considerable. We may want to take all these kinds of effects into moral account. It is tempting to want to solve all these problems with one theoretical move: the wrongness of what we do is determined by our share of the total harm done. We divide it up equally among the persons who together do the harm in question. But this is not satisfactory. It is true that, sometimes, many people together cause serious harm, but what each does is of no harm at all. In those cases we should say that, while together we do harm, individually we act rightly. The wrongness of what we do collectively does not spill over to what each of us do. I have discussed this elsewhere and say no more about collective responsibility in this context. And where we do cause serious harm together with other persons, but where our own action is not of negligible importance, even though the effects of it are not noticeable, we want to know exactly how bad our own contribution to the evil produced is. This is of importance if, by producing this harm, we also produce something good. Perhaps we ought to go on producing this harm because of the good we do at the same time. This question is of most obvious importance in the cases where, individually, we cause a little harm to a great many people. Even if they do not notice this, the harm produced may be considerable, and it should be given its due in our moral mathematics. Or so I will argue, at any rate.

The point of departure of my discussion is classical hedonistic utilitarianism. Classical hedonistic utilitarianism has come into disrepute in the contemporary discussion. Few people today seem to believe that utilitarianism is a plausible doctrine at all, but those few people who do, seem almost without

exception to believe in some variety of what they call "preference utilitarianism". I will not try to explain in the present context why I find preference utilitarianism less satisfactory than hedonistic utilitarianism. My aim is more restricted. I want to state the classical version of utilitarianism, i.e., hedonistic utilitarianism, as clearly as possible, show that it is at least a consistent position, and discuss some unexpected implications and complications that it gives rise to. In particular, I elaborate on the classical idea that, what matters from a moral point of view, is subjective time rather than objective time, and I claim that on the most plausible version of the classical doctrine, there exist not noticeable, or "sub-noticeable" changes of well-being.

This discussion ends up in the claim that such sub-noticeable changes are morally relevant and in the observation that classical hedonistic utilitarianism leads to the conclusion (ultimately in repugnance, it might seem) that there are conceivable circumstances where it would be right to torture one (otherwise perfectly happy) person in order to make sure that an enormous number of people, who all live very good lives indeed, each experiences, for a brief moment, a not noticeable or sub-noticeable improvement of his or her situation. As a matter of fact, the least sub-noticeable improvement of well-being is taken as our unit, in classical hedonistic moral calculations. All this moral information is of importance, if we want to develop a timely moral sensibility, I conjecture.

2. HEDONISTIC UTILITARIANISM

By "classical" utilitarianism I refer to a moral theory according to which a particular action is right if, and only if, in the situation, there was nothing the agent could have done instead such that, had the agent done it, the world, on the whole, would have been better. According to the same theory, an action is wrong, if, and only if, it is not right. Note that we are here discussing a criterion of rightness of actions, not any method of arriving at a correct moral decision.

On hedonistic utilitarianism the improvement of a situation is measured in hedonistic terms. What does that mean? I will not go very deeply into moral psychology in general here. It suffices to notice that according to the theory under discussion, sentient creatures can experience or enjoy at different times various different degrees of well-being. On a rough account we distinguish between states that are pleasurable and states that are examples of displeasure. The difference between pleasure and displeasure, or the degree of well-being, is not to be identified with preferences for one state to another. The fact that a certain change would mean increased well-being (or a transition from displeasure to pleasure) may be a reason to prefer that it takes place to its not taking place, but the increased well-being is not identical with this preference or with the satisfaction of it. On the contrary, on classical hedonistic utilitarianism the fact that the change means an improvement of the hedonic situation