"The sum of displeasure outweighs the sum of pleasure; consequently it would be better if the world did not exist" — "The world is something that rationally should not exist because it causes the feeling subject more displeasure than pleasure" — Chatter of this sort calls itself pessimism today! . . . I despise this pessimism of sensibility. It is itself a sign of deeply impoverished life. (Nietzsche, The Will To Power, section 701, Kaufmann translation.)

ABSTRACT. Richard Henson has argued that hedonistic-average-act-utilitarianism has the extremely counter-intuitive consequence that certain individuals ought to be killed simply because they are unhappy and because their deaths would raise the average level of happiness. It is argued that Henson’s criticisms are correct and that they can be extended to other versions of utilitarianism: total (as opposed to average) utilitarianism, non-hedonistic versions of utilitarianism, and those versions of act-utilitarianism that have originated in the recent controversy about population control.

Many recent critics of utilitarianism have appealed to its alleged “counterintuitive consequences”. It is argued that most versions of utilitarianism allow or even require the performance of acts that are unjust or unfair. Many also contend that utilitarianism is unable to account for the moral weight that we attach to such things as promise keeping and personal integrity. These are very serious problems for utilitarianism. Richard Henson, however, has uncovered an apparent consequence of utilitarianism that is far more counter-intuitive than any of these. He argues that “hedonistic-average-act-utilitarianism” (HAAU) has the consequence that certain individuals ought to be killed simply because they are unhappy and because their deaths would raise the average level of happiness. I believe that Henson’s criticisms are essentially correct and that they can be extended to other versions of utilitarianism. The first section of this paper is an overview of Henson’s arguments. The second section attempts to show that Henson’s objections apply equally to “total” (as opposed to “average”) utilitarianism.

*I am greatly indebted to Jan Narveson, Dan Brock, Mark Overvold and Joe Pitt for helpful criticisms of earlier versions of this paper.
In section III I shall argue that Henson’s criticisms can be extended to non-hedonistic versions of utilitarianism. The final two sections of the paper consider various ways in which one might try to reformulate act-utilitarianism so as to avoid Henson’s objections. I shall consider several versions of act-utilitarianism that have originated in the recent controversy about population control and that have been presented as alternatives to the standard “average” and “total” views. I shall argue that these and all other possible formulations of act-utilitarianism are open to serious objections concerning the wrongness of killing.

1

According to Henson, “utilitarianism... is a generic term for any thesis to the effect that the normative moral terms— for example ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘ought’, — are to be applied to human actions solely on the basis of the goodness or badness of the consequences of those actions”. 1 Act-utilitarianism is the view that “An act A is right for a given person to perform in a given situation only if there is no other act B open to him which would produce a more favorable balance of good consequences relative to bad ones”. 2 Henson argues against hedonistic act-utilitarianism, i.e., that version of AU that defines ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in terms of ‘happiness’ and ‘unhappiness’ or ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’. Hedonistic utilitarianism presupposes that the happiness of different people can be measured and compared. For in the absence of criteria for measuring happiness, the notion of “maximizing” (total or average) happiness is simply “ill-defined”. Following Henson, we assign the number 10 (“hedons”) to a person at times when he is very happy, 0 when he is neither happy nor unhappy and −10 when he is very unhappy. “Hedon-hours (days, weeks, etc.)” are our basic units for measuring the amount of happiness or unhappiness produced by an action. One hedon-hour is equal to the value of living for one hour at a hedonic level of 1. Living for an hour at −2 hedons and then four hours at .5 hedons has a net value of 0 hedon hours.

According to Henson, if a person will be “hedonically below par” as long as he continues to live, then his death would raise the overall average — assuming that no one else’s average would be lowered as a result of his death. Therefore, HAAU implies that if a person would be