1. INTRODUCTION

When Bernard Williams some twenty years ago strongly repudiated the utilitarian doctrine, he also conjectured that the "day cannot be too far off in which we hear no more of it". This prophesy has not come true. Utilitarianism is very much a live doctrine, and the discussion about it the last two decades has been more intense than ever. Personally I believe also that utilitarianism provides us with the most plausible approach to normative ethics. However, the doctrine is not without difficulties. In the present paper I will address some of them. I take my point of departure in the version of the utilitarian formula that I find personally most plausible, to wit, the classical hedonistic one. This version has come into disrepute in the contemporary discussion. It seems that most contemporary adherents of the utilitarian doctrine accept some variety of what they call "preference utilitarianism". I will not try to explain why I find preference utilitarianism less satisfactory than classical hedonistic utilitarianism. My aim is more restricted. I want to state the classical version as clearly as possible 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 changes are morally relevant (and in the claim that our unit in our utilitarian calculations should be the smallest sub-noticeable difference of well-being) and in the observation that classical hedonistic utilitarianism...
utilitarianism leads to the conclusion (ultimate 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.

Classical hedonistic utilitarians have often prided themselves with the belief that their criterion of rightness is purely empirical. It transpires from my discussion, however, that this belief is mistaken. While it is part and parcel of the spirit of classical utilitarianism that the criterion of rightness should be empirical, classical utilitarianism must be buttressed by at least some "extra" normative stipulations, otherwise it will simply be - empty. However, a rationale for at least some of these stipulations can, and will, be given.

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. By classical "hedonistic" utilitarianism, I refer to a theory according to which 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, are 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