Negative Utilitarianism: Not Dead Yet

R. I. SIKORA

In 'Negative Utilitarianism' (*Mind*, July 1974), A. D. M. Walker considers a form of negative utilitarianism according to which though we have an obligation to promote and not to curtail pleasure as well as having an obligation to prevent or relieve pain, given equal amounts of pleasure and pain, our pain obligations count more heavily than our pleasure obligations. Because this is a relatively modest form of negative utilitarianism, it is more difficult to attack than the more extreme forms the doctrine has sometimes taken. Walker gives a sensitive account of a number of common ethical intuitions which would seem to require us to abandon classical utilitarianism in favour of the mild form of negative utilitarianism that he describes. He attempts (I believe unsuccessfully) to show that classical utilitarianism can accommodate these intuitions if it is modified to take account (1) of considerations of fairness, and (2) of the fact that painful experiences tend to have a greater fecundity for bad consequences than pleasant experiences do for good consequences.

Walker admits that the facts about fecundity are not sufficient by themselves to enable classical utilitarianism to satisfy all of the troublesome intuitions because '. . . suppose that on the most far-sighted calculations the consequences of promoting B's pleasure and of relieving A's pain were equal; surely we should still feel . . . that the alternatives were nor morally indifferent' (p. 427). Since according to classical utilitarianism these alternatives *should* be morally equivalent, Walker is right in supposing that a problem still remains. He hopes to solve it by modifying classical utilitarianism to make it allow some weight for fairness: in order to be fair, we must consider not merely the quantity of happiness, but how evenly it is distributed. This *suggests* that in a case where A is in pain and B is not, where the amount of pleasure and pain is equal, and where we have a chance either to relieve A's pain or to provide pleasure for B, that we should relieve A's pain rather than give B pleasure because doing this would narrow the gap between them, whereas giving pleasure to B would widen it. Considerations of fairness would seem then to enable a classic utilitarian to accommodate the common intuition that (even apart from considerations of the high fecundity of pains) the prevention of pain should count more heavily in determining what we ought to do than the promotion of pleasure. But this is not the case because, as Walker admits, considerations of fairness require one to hold that if: '. . . A is in pain and B is not, B's pleasure should be promoted rather than A's pain relieved if A is overall happier than B' (pp. 427–428). That is, considerations of fairness tell us that it is not current pain that counts but overall happiness. Thus even if classical utilitarianism is modified by a recognition both of fairness and of the fecundity of pain, it must still reject the common intuition that even when the fecundity of pain is taken fully into account, pain prevention should count more heavily than the promotion of pleasure.

Though Walker has more to say on the significance of the fecundity of pain, it is not really germane to his essential problem which is the reconciliation of classical utilitarianism with the intuition about pain I have been discussing. He notes that: 'Where neither A nor B is in pain, but A has nonetheless fewer pleasures than B, considerations of fairness would dictate the promotion of A's pleasure rather than B's . . . [Despite this fact] . . . no greater *urgency* attaches to the promotion of A's pleasure than B's (p. 248). This lack of urgency Walker explains by the fact that pleasant experiences characteristically lack the fecundity of painful ones. He seems to suppose that this observation is relevant to the reconciliation of classical utilitarianism with the intuition that *even after full allowance has been made for the fecundity of pain* the prevention of pain should count more heavily than the promotion of pleasure. But (though this may not strike the reader immediately) Walker's observation provides no help whatsoever in accommodating the troublesome intuition; it does not justify a special degree of concern for pains *over and above that justified by their fecundity*.

Although I have criticized Walker's defence of classical utilitarianism modified by considerations of fairness, when it is further modified to avoid making supererogatory demands on us, I think that it is basically correct. It cannot, however, be defended by an attempt to reconcile it with all commonly held ethical beliefs. For one thing, some of these are inconsistent with others. If classical utilitarianism is to survive, it must be combined with ethical revisionism, the view that some of our commonly held moral beliefs are in need of revision.

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA