

Permanent Possibilities of Preference Satisfaction

What is the Good Life? This is the oldest philosophical question and perhaps the most important one. It is the question of what is of intrinsic *prudential value*, that is, the question of what is in and of itself good for us from the purely self-interested point of view.

Preferentism and Objective List Theories

I shall defend a version of *preferentism* according to which well-being is the satisfaction of our informed desires. Preferentism is a *subjective* theories according to which there is no value “in the world” so to speak or good as such. What is good for us is simply getting what we want—whatever it is.

“Adaptive preference” is the hard problem for preferentism. Individuals “adapt” to adverse circumstances by scaling down their aspirations and become satisfied with conditions we should regard as seriously unsatisfactory. Theories which identify well-being with preference satisfaction or other subjective states, critics suggest, cannot explain why, when deprived individuals accept their lot in life, we should nevertheless promote life-improvement. So Martha Nussbaum, reflecting on the lives of poor women in developing countries argues that preferentism, because it is a subjective theory, cannot provide an adequate rationale for alleviating poverty or promoting social justice. “Embraced as a normative position,” she writes, “subjective welfarism makes it impossible to conduct a radical critique of unjust institutions.”¹

Nussbaum suggests that only an “objective” theory of well-being which recognizes the intrinsic value of certain goods for everyone independent of preferences or other subjective states can account for our conviction that such victims of adaptive preference are not well-off and provide a rationale for political change or social improvement.”

Given these worries we ask whether it is possible to produce a subjective account of well-being that solves the problem of adaptive preference. Arguably, Broad Preferentism is that account.

Broad Preferentism

¹ Martha Nussbaum. *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 117.

On the Broad Preferentist account, well-being consists not only in the satisfaction of our actual preferences but in what Amartya Sen calls “capability”—the effective freedom to satisfy merely possible as well as actual preferences. The account I shall sketch here is a friendly amendment to Sen’s “Capability Approach” though it may be that with friends like me Sen doesn’t need enemies. On this account, the more a person wants and can get the better off he is. The victims of adaptive preference Nussbaum describes are badly off since, even though they are content with their lot in life, they are incapable of satisfying a wide range of possible preferences. *Ceteris paribus*, the more options we have for satisfying actual and possible preferences, the better off we are.

If we grant that the possibility of satisfying merely possible preferences contributes to well-being we can solve the problem of adaptive preference without recourse to an objective account of well-being. Moreover arguably, there is independent reason to believe that the mere possibility of satisfying some merely possible preferences does indeed make us better off.

Consider the following case. I am watching a riveting movie: I have no desire to do anything else. Good thing that, because I can’t: I’m on a long plane flight. I like the movie but I am not as well off as I would be watching that movie at home where, even though I *wouldn’t* get up or do anything else, I *could*. That mere possibility would make me better off.

We simply want options even if we never exercise them. I paid an extra \$20 to get an aisle seat so that I could walk around if I felt like it. I didn’t feel like it but upon deplaning don’t regret having spent the extra money--whereas I *did* regret spending \$20 for a theater ticket I never used: the mere possibility of getting up whenever I felt like it was worth it. Some people might not pay as much for mere possibilities: our intuitions about how much birds in the bush are worth vis-à-vis birds in the hand vary widely. Most of us however recognize that they are worth something: all other things being equal we prefer aisle seats.²

All other things being equal the greater our freedom, the more options we have, the better off we are. All things are however rarely equal and, as Sen notes, the sheer number of “real possibilities” available to a person is not all that matters for well-being:

The claim is sometimes made that freedom must be valued independently of the values and preferences of the person whose freedom is being assessed, since it concerns the ‘range’ of choices a person has—*not* how she values the elements in that range or what

² During night flights when there is no view to be had, assuming window and aisle seats are equally (un)comfortable, we still want the aisle..

she chooses from it. I do not believe for an instant that this claim is sustainable...it is odd to conclude that the freedom of a person is no less when she has to choose between three alternatives which she sees respectively as 'bad', 'awful', and 'gruesome' than when she has the choice between three alternatives which she assesses as 'good', 'excellent' and 'superb'.³

Joining the philosophy faculty at my university opened a range of good, excellent and superb alternatives, which benefit me. Joining the Mafia would open a completely different range of options, but these would not contribute to my well-being since they are, from my evaluative perspective, bad, awful and gruesome. The possibility of achieving a state contributes to my well-being only if it is a *valued* state. We therefore want to know: what makes a state of affairs of value for an individual?

On the current account, a state, *S*, is of value for an individual, *i*, to the extent that it is *fruitful*, that is, compatible with other states that *i* prefers or could easily prefer. To make sense of this notion, it will be helpful here to introduce the terminology of *possible worlds*, which we may think of as a metaphor for talking about ways things could be. In the lingo, if *S could* obtain then there is some possible world at which it *does*. Amongst possible worlds, we distinguish the world that represents the way things actually are as the *actual world*. In addition, for the purposes of this discussion, we distinguish a set of possible worlds, *W*, in the neighborhood of the actual world centered upon an individual *i* at a time *t*, worlds at which *i*'s psychology and circumstances are similar to the way they actual are, as *nearby worlds*.

On that long plane trip, I prefer to stay in my seat watching the in-flight movie. But, being an antsy person, regardless of how interested I am in any activity, the desire to get up and do something else is always lurking at a nearby possible world: I could easily prefer to get out of my seat and walk around. Some possibilities however are remote. Being deathly scared of heights, I could not easily have a desire to take up sky-diving: the world at which I prefer that sport is remote.

On the current account, a state is *fruitful* for an individual to the extent that it is compatible with states he prefers at nearby possible worlds—a set of worlds which includes the actual world insofar as the actual world is closest to itself. We can summarize the account of well-being proposed here as follows:

³ Sen, "Capability and Well-Being," pp. 34-5

Relevance: A state, S , is *relevant* to an individual's well-being at a world, w , to a degree commensurate with the distance from w to the closest world, w' , at which he prefers S .

Capability: An individual, i , is *capable* of attaining a state, S at w , to a degree commensurate with the distance from w to the closest world, w' , at which S obtains.

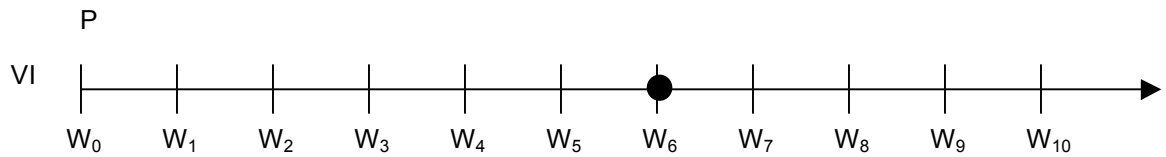
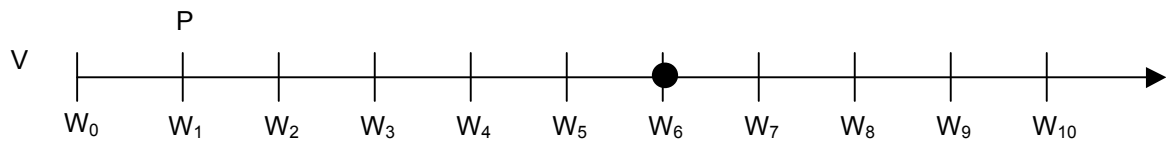
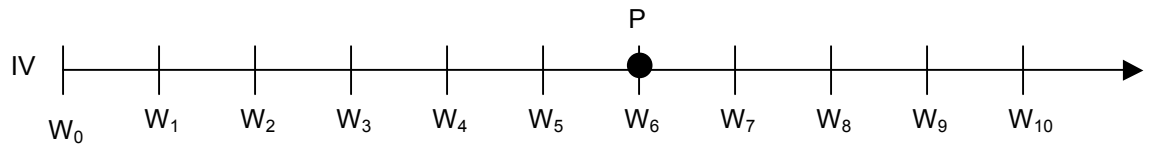
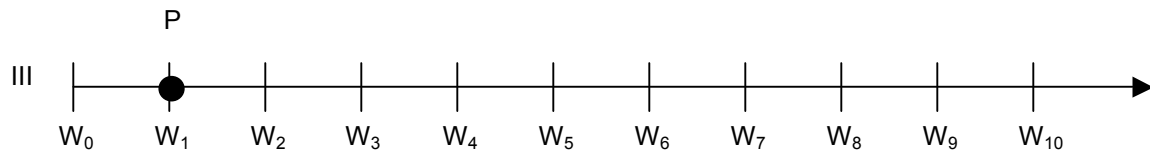
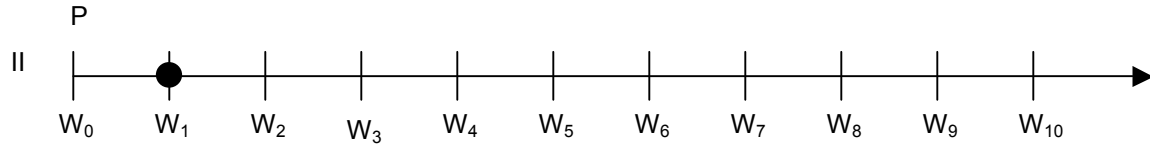
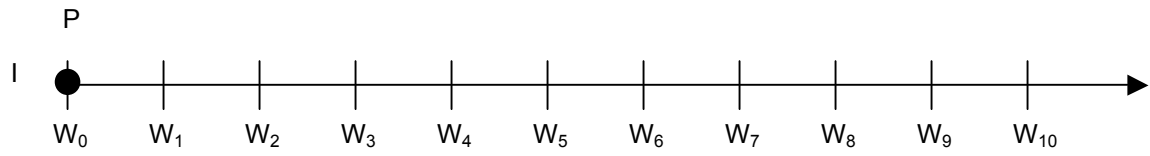
Fruitfulness: The *fruitfulness* of a state, S , for an individual, i , at w , is a function of the range of states with which it is compatible and the relevance of those states to i 's well-being.

Well-being as the capability of attaining fruitful states: The degree to which a state, S , contributes to i 's well-being at w is a function of S 's fruitfulness for i and the degree to which he is capable of attaining S at w .⁴

To see how this works, consider the following cases where w_0 is the actual world centered on an individual, i , "P" marks a world at which i prefers S and "●" marks a world at which S obtains.

Assume that the neighborhood of a world, w , at which S obtains extends to worlds no more than four worlds away from w so that if the closest world at which S obtains is more than four worlds away, then i is not capable of attaining S . Let w_0 be the actual world, let $w_1...w_{10}$ represent worlds in order of increasing distance from w_0 .

⁴ Intuitively we are best off satisfying our actual preferences but benefit to a lesser degree from the capability of satisfying nearby possible preferences and are worse off if we are incapable of satisfying actual or nearby possible preferences. To capture our intuitions, we can say that an individual is capable of attaining a state, S , to degree 1 if S is actual, to a degree between 0 and 1 depending on the distance from the actual world to the closest possible world $w \in W$ at which S obtains. As the distance of the closest possible world in W at which S obtains increases, i 's degree of capability of attaining S approaches 0. If the closest world at which S obtains is not in W then i is capable of attaining S to degree -1. In the same spirit, we can say S is *relevant* to degree 1 for i if i actually prefers S , to a degree between 1 and 0 if i prefers S at a nearby possible world $w \in W$ and to a degree 0 if the closest world, w , at which i prefers S is remote, that is where $w \notin W$. To capture our intuitions we can say that S 's contribution to i 's well-being is function of the product of i 's degree of capability in attaining S and S 's relevance for i , and its fruitfulness, which in turn cashes out as the range of states with which S is compatible and their relevance for i .



In Case I, I actually prefer *S* and attain it: this is as good as it gets. In Case II, I prefer *S*, but forgo it: I'm less well off than I am in I but better off than I'd be if I didn't have the capability of getting *S*.⁵ Case III represents a situation in which, while I do not actually prefer *S*, I could easily prefer it and get it: I'm at home watching that riveting movie on DVD; I don't want to get up but I'm better off for the fact that I might and could. I can't get *S* in Case IV but my incapability doesn't erode my well-being since *S* is irrelevant to me: the world at which I want it is remote. In Case V the inaccessibility of *S* does make me worse off since the world at which I prefer it is in the neighborhood, though not as badly off as I am in Case VI where I actually want *S* but cannot get it. In Cases I – III, *S* contributes to my well-being; in Case IV it has no effect on my well-being; in Cases V and VI it detracts from my well-being.

How Broad Preferentism solves the adaptive preference problem

Broad preferentism solves the problem of adaptive preference, which dogs traditional “narrow” preferentist accounts according to which only the satisfaction of actual preferences contributes to well-being. On the broad preferentist account, even individuals who get what they want are badly off if they cannot satisfy nearby possible preferences.

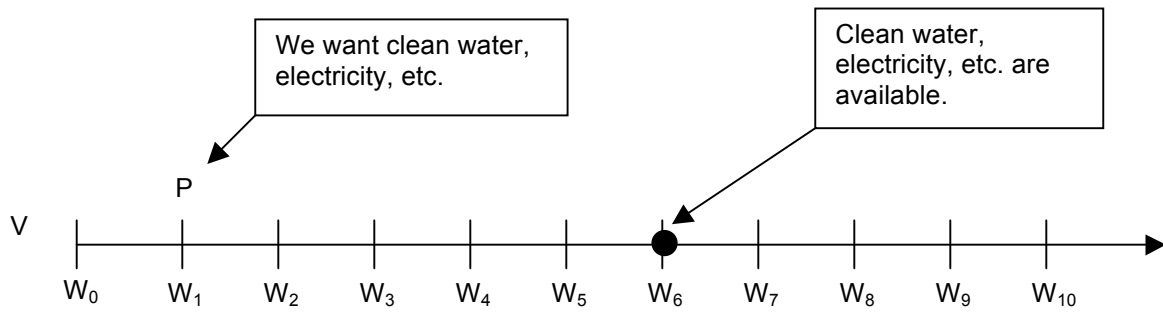
Martha Nussbaum describes poor women “who were severely malnourished, and whose village had no reliable clean water supply...[but] had no feeling of anger... [because]...They knew no other way.”⁶ Their desire for improved conditions was however lurking at a nearby possible world. After participating in a consciousness raising program, “their level of discontent has gone way up: they protest to the local government, asking for clean water, for electricity, for a health visitor.”⁷

Before consciousness-raising, these women were in a situation represented by Case V. They had nearby preferences for clean water, electricity and other amenities but were incapable of attaining them: the world at which those goods were available was remote.

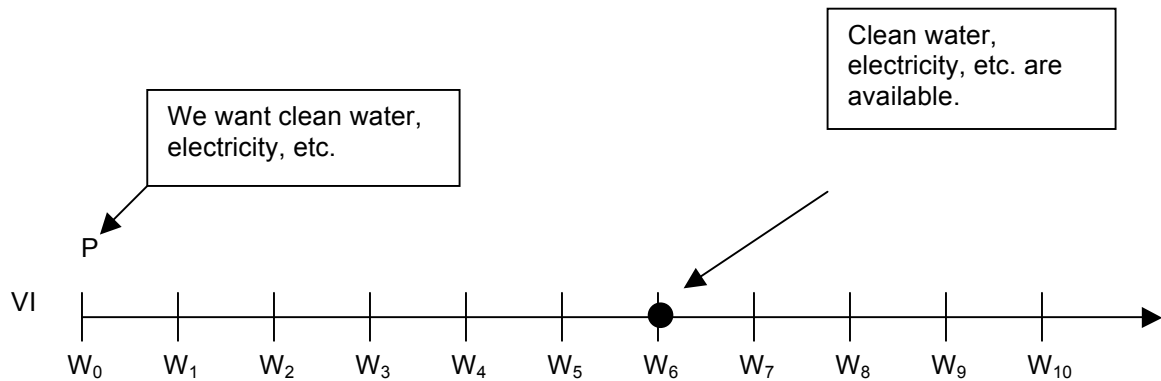
⁵ This is a case of what Sen calls “commitment” noting that contrary to the orthodox view, we do not necessarily choose what we prefer. I prefer to eat but choose to fast, out of my religious convictions or in the interests of making a political statement. I'm better off than I would be if I were starving, that is if I did not have the capability of eating, but not so well-off as I'd be if I were eating. Acting out of commitment I sacrifice some degree of well-being.

⁶ Nussbaum (2000), p. 113.

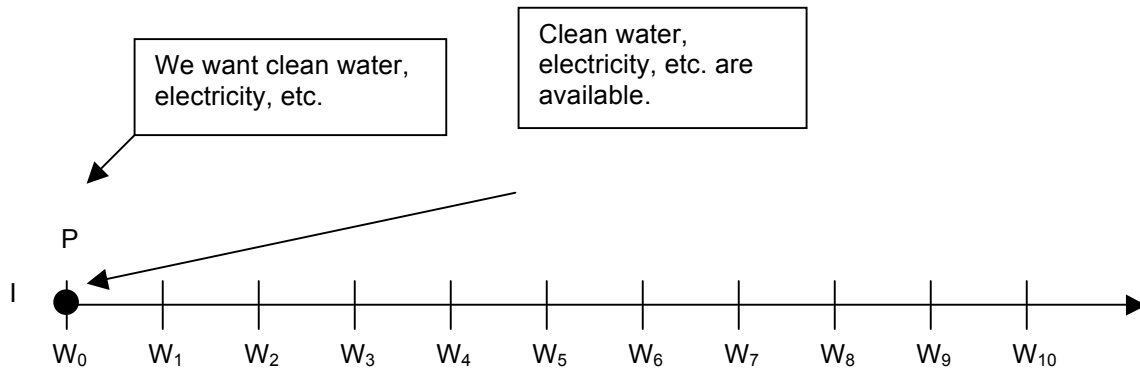
⁷ Nussbaum (2000), pp. 113-114



Given their nearby possible preference for clean water, electricity, etc (at W_1) they would be better off if they had the capability of satisfying that nearby possible preference—just as I would be better off watching that in-flight movie at home, with the capability of getting up and walking around. In the short term at least, consciousness raising made them worse off by, in effect, moving that nearby possible preference to the actual world, W_0 .



However, the hope was that in the long run they would be better off. Inducing them to *actually* want better living conditions would raise their level of discontent so that they would take action to get clean water, electricity, a health visitor and various other amenities. If successful, they would then achieve the best possible state of affairs:



Nussbaum concludes:

The consciousness-raising program has clearly challenged entrenched preferences and satisfactions, taking a normative approach based on an idea of good human functioning.⁸

Here we part ways with Nussbaum. We do not have to adopt an objective account of “good human functioning” to explain why these women are better off wanting and getting better living conditions. On the current account, the consciousness-raising program induced them to acquire the preference for a better life that was lurking at a nearby possible world. Moreover having and satisfying this preference was fruitful for them since the state of affairs they came to prefer opened a range of possibilities for attaining states that they preferred at the actual world and nearby possible worlds.

There may be people who do not have these preferences at nearby possible worlds—individuals for whom the desire for clean water, electricity and the like is as remote as the desire to parachute jump out of a plane is for me. Inducing them to want these things might not be cost-effective or even feasible. Living in San Diego, with miles of splendid beaches, I would be, *ceteris paribus*, better off if I liked going to the beach. I don’t: for me going to the beach is a hassle and sitting on the beach is a bore. When I first moved here I tried to acquire a taste for the beach in order to get more well-being but just couldn’t manage it and eventually decided that the effort wasn’t worth it.

On Nussbaum’s account, however, the items on her list of items she takes to be objectively good are vital for human flourishing in virtue of some hypothesized universal human nature. If people don’t want these things, their preferences are “deformed” and, Nussbaum suggests, they should

⁸ Nussbaum (2000), p. 114

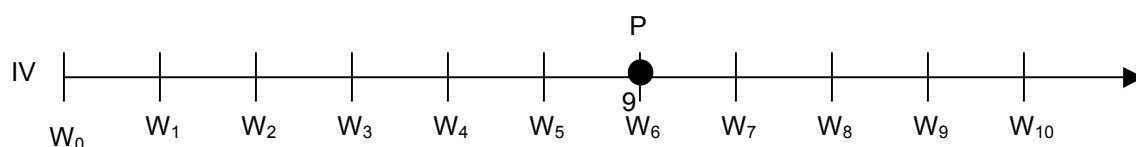
be induced to want them. Consider, for example, one of the items on Nussbaum's list: "Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experience and producing self-expressive works of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical and so forth." Nussbaum's view I suspect is that this kind of cultivation is worthwhile for everyone.

I doubt that. Some people are, whether by nature or nurture, unimaginative, hard-core, tone-deaf, philistines. Worlds at which they appreciate music, literature and the arts are remote. On the current account, programs intended to cultivate their tastes are not worthwhile. As the old American proverb has it: you can't teach a pig to sing—it wastes your time and annoys the pig. Individuals who have no interest (at any nearby possible world) in the items on Nussbaum's list which includes "friendship and concern for others," 'living in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature,' and "the ability to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection" are perfectly well off providing they get the things they do want. If an individual's nearby preferences are limited to desires for food, sex, glitzy gadgets and the leisure to spend hours playing video games he is as well off satisfying these preferences as a person who satisfies a preference for the "higher pleasures" and certainly better off than one who desires these "higher pleasures" but cannot get them.

On the current account it is better to be a satisfied pig than Socrates dissatisfied. If, like Mill we disagree, we can take this as a counterexample to broad preferentism. If however we regard the distinction between "higher" and "lower" pleasures, and the notion that critical reasoning, imagination, appreciation of the arts, love, friendship and virtue are essential to human flourishing as pious, elitist baloney will not be troubled. In any case, broad preferentism does solve the problem of adaptive preference: pace Nussbaum, it explains why improving the material conditions of impoverished and oppressed individuals, even if they have adjusted to their circumstances, is worthwhile.

Prudential and Moral Value

The account of well-being suggested here departs radically from the vision of the Good Life associated with Christianity, Buddhism and other "wisdom traditions." On the current account, wealth and greed make us better off. If we are poor and lack access to technology so that preference-satisfaction is not feasible we might do well to extinguish desire, as the Buddha recommends. Consider Case IV



I can't get *S*—the closest possible world at which it obtains is remote so its value is -1. However *S* is irrelevant for me since the closest possible world at which I want it is also remote so its relevance value is 0. *S*'s contribution to my well-being is therefore 0. Assuming that nothing we can do would make getting *S* feasible, the best we can do for ourselves is to extinguish the desire for *S*. If I actually desired *S* I would be much worse off at -1. This is however a consolation prize: if I both wanted and got *S* I would be much better off, at 1. If you can satisfy desire, you shouldn't extinguish it.

Again, suppose that I do not have excess income to save or invest and, living in precarious circumstances at the pleasure of arbitrary bureaucrats, warlords and rural patrons, I cannot achieve any level of material security. In such circumstances, for the same reason, the best I can do for myself is to let go of my desire for material security and control over my life and follow Jesus' advice to emulate the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, which neither toil nor spin but trust their Heavenly Father to take care of them. If however I have the means to save and invest I would be better off ignoring this advice

For most of human history most people have been powerless and, by modern standards, desperately poor. Until recently, most have had little scope for preference-satisfaction. Under such conditions extinguishing desire was the best they could do—hence the popularity of this wisdom literature. Now, we can do better for ourselves: greed and wealth make us better off. Money is the permanent possibility of preference-satisfaction and, *ceteris paribus*, the more we have the better off we are. However wealth does us no good apart from greed. If we don't want the things money can buy—at some nearby possible world—then being able to get these things doesn't benefit us. The more we want and can get the better off we are.

But *should* we from the moral point of view be greedy and do all we can to create wealth, enrich ourselves and promote our own well-being? Certainly not. Most of the games we play are zero-sum games and the better we do for ourselves the worse off other people are so, in addition to councils of prudence, religious and philosophical wisdom traditions articulate *moral* rules: do unto others as you would have them do unto you; treat everyone as one and no one, including yourself, as more or less than one.

Why should we follow *these* rules and, more fundamentally, why should we be moral? No reason: morality is a fundamental commitment—and it is certainly not licensed by appeals to self-interest.