Lost Innocence

Preference utilitarians hold that preference satisfaction alone contributes to individual’s well-being and that when it comes to preferences neither the origin nor the content of preferences counts.¹ To make this account plausible however they distinguish between what Harsanyi has called “manifest” and “true” preferences. The latter, which alone count, are those which individuals would have under certain ideal conditions, typically including possession of relevant information, cool deliberation and the like.

These requirements are not supposed to impose restrictions on the content of preferences. In fact they do: while a variety of preferences which we might regard as self-destructive, perverse or silly can count as true preferences, the preferentist account does rule out the preference for innocence.

Two Principles of Preference Utilitarianism

Preference utilitarians hold what Harsanyi has called the principle of preference autonomy, namely the doctrine that “in deciding what is good and what is bad for a given individual, the ultimate criterion can only be his own wants and his own preferences.”² On this account, neither the origin nor the content of our preferences matters for our well-being—only that our preferences, whatever they are, are satisfied. To make this plausible however they stipulate only those preference which are such that we would have had them in ideal conditions count. Thus, Harsanyi notes we need to distinguish between a person’s manifest preferences and his true preferences. His manifest preferences are his actual preferences as manifested by his observed behavior, including possibly those based on erroneous factual beliefs, or on careless logical analysis, or on strong emotions that at the moment greatly hinder rational choice. In contrast, a person’s true preferences are the preferences he would have had if he had all the relevant factual information, always reasoned with the greatest possible care, and were in a state of mind most conducive to rational choice.³

People however do not only have preferences amongst various bundles of goods—they may have preferences amongst bundles of personal characteristics as well—and some such preferences appear to be such that they could not, logically, count as “true” preferences.

There are a variety of cases in which we may, reasonably, prefer ignorance of certain facts about ourselves and our circumstances. First, we may prefer to be unaware of undesirable conditions we cannot fix. Secondly, we may prefer to be ignorant of options

³ Ibid.
which would impede rational choice. All the dishes on the Chinese restaurant menu taste more or less the same to me—the cost of deliberation would outweigh any difference in the benefit of choosing one rather than the other. Finally, we may prefer to information that is likely to lead us into temptation. Preferring A to B is not merely a matter of being disposed to choose A rather than B but believing that A is better than B. If there were no imaginable circumstances in which I should take action to get A rather than B I doubt that I could count as believing that A is better than B, but if I believe a is better than be there might still be conditions under which I would take action to get B rather than A. This occurs to me frequently, whenever I

They do not merely what a way of life: they want a way of life lived as a particular sort of person would live and experience it.

Innocents do not realize that there are alternatives to the ways of life they lead. They do not merely believe that alternatives are unattainable: they have never even imagined alternatives. Until recently most people were innocent and even now some, living in “traditional societies,” still are.

Many sophisticated observers imagine that innocence is a good thing and want to preserve it. So, for example, surveyors planning the route of an oil pipeline through the Amazon jungle and their entourage of anthropologists attempt to avoid hunter-gatherer bands that roam the area. Experience has shown that, once hunter-gatherers make contact with outsiders, they abandon their nomadic way of life and go into business selling curios to ecotourists. Once innocence is lost there is no return: the natives can go back to their nomadic way of life but they cannot recover their traditional culture since an essential feature of their culture is precisely the absence of perceived alternatives.

Quite a few people worry that in a range of cases like this one the provision of further information about available options is harmful to the extent that it undermines traditional cultures. While there are a variety of motives for this worry, some sophisticated observers promote cultural preservation because they believe that the natives would prefer to be ignorant of these options in order to live as authentic participants in their indigenous cultures.

If, as I shall argue, it is not possible to prefer Innocence, this would undermine one motive for the program of cultural preservation.

**Preference**

In developing his theory of consumer behavior in terms of revealed preference, Samuelson closes with a disclaimer: “nothing said here in the field of consumer’s behavior affects in any way or touches upon at any point the problem of welfare
economics, except in the sense of revealing the confusion in the traditional theory of these distinct subjects. ⁴

Samuelson’s account of consumer behavior assumes that we are dealing with consumers, agents who make informed decisions and whose preferences are to be understood accordingly. Innocents are not consumers, at least when it comes to extended alternatives: what makes them Innocents is precisely that they are uninformed. Moreover, what we are interested in is precisely whether Innocence is good for them and whether programs of cultural preservation intended to preserve it ought to be pursued.

To address these questions we need a richer notion of preference that plausibly links preference satisfaction with welfare. A number have been proposed, defining individuals’ “true” or “rational” preferences in terms of what they would prefer under certain counterfactual conditions that typically include being well-informed and being in a rational frame of mind.

It is however precisely these counterfactuals that pose problems when it comes to considering the preferences of Innocents. If the natives were informed about alternatives to hunting-gathering they would prefer them: that is why anthropologists want to keep them in the dark. When the opportunity to go into the souvenir business presents itself they jump at it. Granted this decision may not have been fully informed. Nevertheless even as they gain more experience with their chosen way of life they stick with it. They have not burnt any bridges because, having been hunter-gatherers there are none to burn: at any time they chose they can melt back into the forest and resume their old way of life.

This seems to be a perfect example of the Tiresean Principle: they have experienced both ways of life and can compare; they could easily go back to hunting-gathering but choose not to.