

Meet the Meat: So Where's the Beef?

A large dairy animal approached Zaphod Beeblebrox's table...

“Good evening,” it lowed and sat back heavily on its haunches, “I am the main Dish of the Day. May I interest you in parts of my body?...”

“That's absolutely horrible,” exclaimed Arthur...“I just don't want to eat an animal that's standing here inviting me to...”

“Better than eating an animal that doesn't want to be eaten,” said Zaphod.

Douglas Adams. *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*

Preferentism is 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."¹

If preferentism is true then it would seem to follow that modifying a person's preferences so that they are satisfied by what is on offer should be as good as improving the circumstances of her life to satisfy her preferences. Our intuitive response to stories of life-adjustment through brainwashing, psychosurgery and the like suggests otherwise: we believe that, even apart from life-adjustment programs, deprived individuals who have become satisfied with their lot would do better to want more and get more.

Preferences and other subjective states can be "deformed" or manipulated thus, critics argue, subjective theories which identify well-being with preference satisfaction or other subjective states cannot explain why, where deprived individuals accept their lot in life, we should promote consciousness-raising and life improvement. So Martha Nussbaum, reflecting on the lives of poor women in developing countries argues that preferentism, because it is a

¹ Harsanyi, J. C. (1982). Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior. *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. A. Sen and B. Williams. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 39-62.

subjective theory, cannot provide an adequate rationale for alleviating poverty or promoting social justice.²

I argue that preferentism, broadly construed to admit the contribution of possible preference satisfaction to well-being, resists such putative counterexamples.

I first sketch a broadly preferentist account, drawing upon Sen's capability approach, according to which the possibility of satisfying "nearby" possible preferences contributes to well-being. I then argue that *broad preferentism* thus understood explains why, in scenarios typically cited against preferentism, modifying people's preferences to be satisfied by available options is not the moral equivalent of improving the conditions of their lives to satisfy their preferences.

1 Broad preferentism

According to the capability approach conceived by Amartya Sen it is the "capability" of attaining valued states of being and doing that makes a person's life go well. Sen's understanding of well-being differs from utilitarian accounts in two respects. First, he holds that the capability of achieving valued states of being and doing as well as their attainment contributes to well-being. Secondly, he rejects "subjective welfarism," the doctrine that states are intrinsically valuable--constituents of the "evaluative space"--just because they produce utility and only to the extent that they produce utility.³

² Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Nussbaum tells the stories of poor women in developing countries who are reconciled to poverty and unjust treatment and, on her account, have come to *prefer* their life circumstances. Since their (overly modest) preferences are satisfied, she argues, the preferentist cannot explain why the under which they live ought to be improved. I have argued elsewhere that Nussbaum's claim that the poor women whose stories she tells *prefer* their deprived state is implausible: the stories suggest rather that while they would prefer things be otherwise they believe, with good reason, that there is little chance of improvement and make the best of a bad thing. Nevertheless it is easy enough to imagine cases where individuals do come to prefer, and not merely tolerate, bad conditions. Beta Minuses, through lifelong indoctrination, learn to prefer being Beta Minuses, large dairy animals are bred to prefer being eaten, Winston Smith learns to love Big Brother and it is not unlikely that there are non-fictional cases of individuals who as a consequence of indoctrination or adjustment to deprived conditions prefer the circumstances of their lives to what we should regard as better alternatives.

³ Amartya Sen, "Capabilities and Well-Being" in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.33. "The capability approach," he notes, "differs from utilitarian

One of the most serious worries about utilitarian theories concerns their failure to explain why the satisfaction of preferences that are overly modest does not contribute to well-being. Sen's account explains why: individuals whose preferences have been "deformed" so that they are satisfied with impoverished conditions and unfair treatment are badly off because, even if their actual preferences are satisfied they lack the capability of attaining a great many states of being and doing that are of value. In this respect at least the capability approach does better than utilitarian theories.

I suggest however that it is the thesis that capabilities as well as attainments contribute to well-being that does the work for Sen rather than his rejection of subjective welfarism. According to the account I propose, *broad preferentism*, while the capability of attaining valued states contributes to well-being, items figure in the evaluative space because and to the extent that they contribute to satisfying the agent's actual or nearby possible preferences.

Restricted notions of possibility figure twice over in this account. First, a person has the "capability" to achieve a state of being or doing if achieving that state is a "real possibility" for her. Secondly, items are included in a person's evaluative space to the extent that they satisfy preferences that it is possible for her to have. Both these modal notions deserve comment.

Capability is more exacting than logical or nomological possibility and, as Sen notes, is skewed with respect to political liberty. I am free to serve as president of the United States and am both physically and psychologically able to do the job, but I am not "capable" in the requisite sense because I could not get elected. By contrast, I am capable of a wide range of criminal activity, which I am not at liberty to undertake. I am capable of achieving a state of being or

evaluation...in making room for a variety of human acts and states as important in themselves (not just *because* they may produce utility, nor just to the *extent* that they yield utility)."

doing, if I am not prevented from doing so by physical inability or constraint, psychological incapacity or social circumstances.

Some capabilities are more important to well-being than others.⁴ On the current account to explain this we understand the inclusion of an item in the evaluative space as a matter of degree reflecting the "distance" of the possibility that an individual prefer it from the way things actually are with her. The capability of getting *x* contributes to my well-being to the extent that the possibility of my preferring *x* is "nearby," that is, something I could easily have preferred or come to prefer.

The idea that some preferences are "nearby" while others are relatively remote assumes a notion of the comparative possibility according to which some possibilities are closer to the way things actually are than others.⁵ The more similar a possible world is to the actual world, the closer the possibility it represents. A world where everything is the same as it actually is except that I have an extra freckle represents a closer possibility than one where the sun orbits the earth. There are some preferences I have at nearby possible worlds where my basic psychology and the circumstances of my life are unchanged. There are other preferences which are remote: I would have them only if I were a very different sort of person.

My actual preference ranking provides evidence for the ordering of my possible preferences from nearby to remote but does not determine it. The firmness of my preferences contributes as well. Initially, Mr d'Arcy ranked very low on Elizabeth's list of eligible suitors but

⁴ Sen ("Capability and Well-Being," pp. 34-5) asks: "How can we judge the goodness of a 'range' of choice independently of—or prior to the alternatives between which the person can choose...One alternative is simply to *count* the number of elements in the set as reflecting the value of the range of choice. But...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'. Further, it is always possible to add trivially to the number of options...and it would be amazing to see such additions as compensating for the loss of really valued options." On the current account, bad, awful and gruesome alternatives are those that satisfy remote possible preferences.

⁵ Vide David Lewis. *Counterfactuals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973. See especially pp. 44 – 64.

given her psychological make-up he was very close to being at the top of her list. Elizabeth could easily love or hate Mr d'Arcy but, given the sort of person she was, the possibility of her being indifferent to him was remote. The psychology and circumstances that form a person's actual evaluative perspective, not her actual preference ranking per se, determine the ordering of her possible preferences.

The degree to which a state of being or doing is included in the evaluative spaces of different individuals differs. However a state's compatibility with other states is the same regardless of where it figures in a person's evaluative space. Whether I am a deviant who craves amputation or a normal for whom that preference is remote, having an arm amputated diminishes my capability.

Each item's degree of inclusion in the evaluative space determines the extent to which the capability of achieving it contributes to well-being. The capability of satisfying actual preferences, which are included in the evaluative space to the highest degree, counts heavily toward well-being, but does not trump all other capabilities and where the satisfaction of actual preferences is incompatible with the satisfaction of a great many nearby possible ones it may make a person on net worse off. The deviant who satisfies his actual preference for amputation loses the capability of satisfying a whole host of nearby possible preferences.

The satisfaction of perverse preferences and preferences that have been "deformed" through adaptation to deprived conditions or the internalization of oppressive ideologies, does not on net contribute to well-being: the loss of capability for satisfying an extensive range of nearby possible preferences leaves most individuals whose preferences are perverse or overly modest worse off. The poor women in developing countries whose stories Nussbaum tells in making her case against subjective welfarism may be satisfied with their lot but they are not, on

this account, well off since the circumstances of their lives preclude their satisfying a great many nearby possible preferences.

Nevertheless, two worries remain. First, since the origin of preferences does not matter on this account, it seems that changing preferences to suit the environment should be as good as changing the environment to suit preferences. Our aversion to life-adjustment programs suggests otherwise. Secondly, it may be suggested that the current account covertly introduces an "objective list" of nearby possible preferences and so does not count as a subjective preferentist theory.

I shall argue that broad preferentism is not, covertly, an objective list theory. First however I make the case that thought experiments intended to show that fixing things so that people get what they want is better than fixing people to want what they get are defective.

2 Getting what you want and wanting what you get

Critics worry that where the source of a person's preference is tainted its satisfaction may not contribute to her well-being. The story is familiar: advertising manufactures the taste for glitzy gadgets, designer jeans and SUVs; patriarchy promotes women's quest for extreme thinness; neocolonialism induces people around the world to prefer Western junk food to their native cuisines. Satisfying such tainted preferences, some suggest, does not contribute to well-being.

Nevertheless, where preferences are tainted by their origin there is usually something else wrong with them. Glitzy gadgets end up gathering dust: people buy them on impulse, without becoming fully informed or engaging in the cool deliberation that preferentists recommend. A widespread taste for designer jeans and other "positional goods" undermines overall utility

leaving the buyer and everyone else worse off in the long run.⁶ SUVs are ugly and unmanageable--moreover, SUV-haters simply cannot imagine that anyone with sense could *really* want such things: thought experiments have their limits.

Discovering the tainted origins of our preferences however does not lead us to repudiate them or even feel that we should. Homilies about the tainted origins of preferences for slimness or for Western consumer products do not make women or adolescents in developing countries change their ways. It is perfectly reasonable to say, "I know my obsession with dieting is a consequence of socialization in a patriarchal society, but dammit, I want to be thin and I don't care why." Moreover, where preferences seem good to us we do not worry about their origins. We applaud anti-smoking campaigns and other public service propaganda, and actively support attempts to instill "values" in our children.

Crucial thought experiments which scrupulously avoid introducing features that make induced preferences bad on independent grounds suggest that *ceteris paribus* changing one's preferences to suit environmental conditions is no worse than modifying one's environment to satisfy prior preferences.

Suppose I am going to spend time in a place where American food is hard to get. I can pack a supply of frozen hamburgers and coke to see me through or I can work to acquire a taste for the native cuisine. If the costs are the same, intuitively, there is no reason to prefer the former strategy. Our intuition in this kind of case would not, I think, change if, instead of engaging in a program of gustatory self-cultivation, I take a pill or submit to neurosurgery to change my tastes providing the costs and risks are the same as the costs and risks of hauling a supply of junk food with me.

⁶ Vide, e.g. Fred Hirsch *The Social Limits to Growth*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976

If this is correct then *all other things being equal* adapting preferences to suit life circumstances is no worse than adapting the environment to suit preferences.

In the cases of "preference deformation" Martha Nussbaum cites however all other things are not equal. Poor women in developing countries who are satisfied with their lot are not as well off as affluent individuals who want more and get more, on the broad preferentist account, because they lack the capability of satisfying a great many nearby possible preferences. Affluent individuals by contrast have an extensive capability for satisfying nearby preferences and are therefore better off.

All things are not equal in fictional dystopias, where people are doped or brainwashed into preferring severely restrictive conditions, either. Most people prefer not to be doped or brainwashed and even in hedonistic dystopias traditionally cited as counterexamples to utilitarian accounts, they are induced to prefer conditions that seriously restrict their capabilities.⁷ The challenge for someone who holds that fixing people's preferences is not as good as fixing their environment is to produce a *ceteris paribus* case that pumps the intuition. If capabilities for the satisfaction of nearby possible preferences figure in determining when all other things are equal, it seems that none is forthcoming.

3 But is it preferentism?

We assume that whatever a person's actual preferences, possible preferences for bodily health and integrity, political liberty, and other items on Nussbaum's list of essential capabilities

⁷ Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the paradigm of this genre, like Nozick's utility machine, makes an intuitive case against hedonistic accounts of well-being but does not tell against broad preferentism. Even if citizens of Huxley's dystopia are enjoying themselves and prefer their state, nearby possible preferences which they do not have the capability of satisfying are lurking. Minor technical glitches or missed doses of soma can leave them very dissatisfied indeed. Imagining a super-dystopia where nearby possible preferences as well as actual preferences for unattainable states are removed does not undermine broad preferentism either since on this account a person who has extensive actual and nearby possible preferences and the capability of satisfying them is better off than a person who is satisfied because she has few nearby possible preferences or capabilities.

for human flourishing are lurking nearby so that a person's inability to satisfy them makes her worse off.

Broad preferentism is in fact close to Nussbaum's own account. Nussbaum claims that hers is an Aristotelian middle way between "subjective welfarism" and Platonic accounts according to which "the fact that people desire or prefer something is basically not relevant."⁸ Her own view about which capabilities are important for human flourishing arises from reflection on empirical facts about people's concerns, from which it is possible to generalize about which preferences are features of our common human nature. Her list, it would seem, is an attempt to categorize the possibilities for preference satisfaction that are "closest" for us given our common human nature.

If this is how Nussbaum's account should be understood, then she is a preferentist. Preferentism is a conceptual thesis about what makes something good for us—not an empirical account of how humans are wired up or what preferences they have as a consequence. It is compatible with the empirical hypothesis that humans have many of the same actual preferences, that some possible preferences are more nearly possible for most humans than others are and, indeed, with the empirical conjecture that all humans have nearby possible preferences for the items on Nussbaum's list. Preferentism does not assume that individual's preferences are idiosyncratic.

Broad preferentism however has consequences that Nussbaum and others sympathetic to her account might not accept:

First, on this account individuals who have no chance of improving the conditions of their lives are no better off for having actual or nearby possible preferences for states that they

⁸ Nussbaum, p. 117.

cannot attain. Poor women in developing countries are not better off for recognizing that they are individuals with rights who should be getting a better shake unless that recognition leads to the expansion of their capabilities. Preferences contribute to well-being only to the extent that we have the capability of satisfying them.

Secondly, on this account, individuals with a great many nearby possible preferences (including actual preferences) and the capability of satisfying them is better off than an individual with fewer nearby preferences, whether or not she is capable of satisfying them. Capabilities contribute to well-being only to the extent that are possibilities for the attainment of valued states and states are valued only to the extent that they are the object of actual or nearby possible preferences. While preferentists agree that poor, oppressed women would be better off if they wanted the items on Nussbaum's list and could get them, we hold further that they would be even better off if they also wanted fast cars, fancy gadgets, and accommodating toy boys, could easily come to want even more and were capable of getting the whole lot.

This is a welcome, intuitive consequence of the account. Expensive tastes may impose a burden on society, but we believe that self-cultivation promotes individual well-being, providing we have the means to satisfy our expensive tastes and don't lose our appreciation for simpler pleasures in the process: greed is good providing we have the resources to satisfy it.

4 The Restaurant at the End of the Universe

Modesty is bad except as a last resort. Stories about individuals who are satisfied with conditions we regard as unsatisfactory because their wants are modest or perverse, like Douglas Adams' fantasy of large dairy animals bred to want to be eaten, are counterexamples to the claim that well-being consists in the satisfaction of actual preferences. Broad preferentism however resists such counterexamples. On this account if we are going to eat animals anyway, it is

certainly better for them to want to be eaten than not to want to be eaten. But they are worse off if they want to be eaten and are eaten than if they don't want to be eaten and are not eaten. Being eaten effectively eliminates all capability for the satisfaction of other actual or nearby possible preferences

Where there is no reasonable possibility of changing the conditions of our lives to accommodate our preferences, we are better off scaling down our preferences. (If we balk at life-adjustment it is perhaps because we are overly optimistic about the prospects for life-improvement). Where change is feasible however broad preferentism explains why improving the conditions of people's lives is better than enabling them to adjust to deprived conditions. We should be greedy if we can and stoical if we must--but should not, in any case, be satisfied with the satisfaction of modest actual preferences since the capability of satisfying possible preferences, particularly those which are nearby, contributes to well-being.

Broad preferentism thus sets the agenda for what most recognize as the good life: the serenity to accept the things we cannot change and courage to change the things we can change; a wide range of options from which to choose and the capability of achieving states of being and doing that satisfy our actual and nearby possible preferences. It is therefore is the intuitively correct account of well-being.