

### Worlds, Preferences and Well-Being

*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.*

#### 1 Life-adjustment and life-improvement

Advocates of the Capability Approach hold that the capability, or the effective freedom to attain valued functionings, as well as their actual attainment, contributes to well-being. Granting that capabilities as well as attainments are of value, however, we recognize that not all capabilities contribute to well-being: as Sen himself notes, the capability of achieving bad, awful and gruesome outcomes does not make us better off.

Sen leaves open the question of how we are to distinguish those capabilities that benefit us from those which do not. He suggests however that the cut should not be made on the basis whether or not states produce utility nor on the extent to which they produce utility. Following Sen, Martha Nussbaum argues further that no subjective account of well-being is adequate to the task. Reflecting on the lives of poor women in developing countries she suggests that their preferences have been “deformed” by poverty and oppression and argues that preferentism, because it is a subjective theory, cannot provide an adequate rationale for promoting social justice.<sup>i</sup> “Embraced as a normative position,” she writes, “subjective welfarism makes it impossible to conduct a radical critique of unjust institutions.”<sup>ii</sup> It cannot

explain why governments, NGOs or socially concerned individuals should attempt to improve the condition of the poor and oppressed who are reconciled to their fate and satisfied with the circumstances of their lives.

Such cases of *adaptive preference* pose what might be called “the hard problem” for preference utilitarianism. We are skeptical about the value of life-adjustment in such circumstances and that it is bad news for preferentism, 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.” If preferentism is true it follows that *ceteris paribus* modifying a person’s preferences to be satisfied by what is on offer should be as good as improving the circumstances of her life to satisfy her preferences.<sup>iii</sup> Critics therefore suggest that without some “objective” account of well-being we cannot explain why satisfying some preferences is, as we believe, better than satisfying others, why satisfying some preferences may leave us on net worse off or why, in a range of cases, we should reject life-adjustment in favor of life-improvement.

My aim is defend a subjective welfarist account of well-being against such objections by reconstructing the Capability Approach as a preferentist account of well-being. According to the proposed account, *Broad Preferentism*, preference satisfaction alone—*possible as well as actual*—is of value. States of affairs contribute to well-being because and to the extent that they satisfy actual or nearby possible preferences, and are *fruitful*, that is, compatible with a range states that satisfy further actual or nearby possible preferences. It is the capability of attaining such valued states that makes us better off.

Broad preferentism solves the problem of adaptive preference. Individuals whose preferences are “deformed” are satisfied with fruitless states of affairs, which constrain their options so that they are incapable of satisfying a wide range of nearby possible preferences—preferences they “could easily have had.” Recognizing the value of capabilities

as well as actual attainments allows us to explain why individuals who satisfy “deformed” or perverse preferences may not on net benefit from doing so.

## 2 The Capability Approach

Sen's own understanding of well-being differs from traditional preferentist accounts in two respects. First, Sen rejects subjective welfarism. "The Capability Approach," he writes, differs from utilitarian evaluation (more generally welfarist' 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.<sup>iv</sup>

Secondly, Sen holds that the “capability,” or the effective freedom to achieve valued states of being and doing, as well as the actual attainment of valued states, contributes to well-being. Sen thus rejects what might be called "welfare actualism"—the doctrine that only actual states of affairs contribute to well-being: capabilities, “the alternative combinations of functions that are feasible for a person to achieve,” contribute as well.<sup>v</sup> Nevertheless, as Sen notes, freedom cannot stand on its own as an object of value: to be plausible, any account of well-being that assigns value to capability must also assign value to attainment:

Comparisons of freedom raise interesting issues of evaluation. 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 she chooses from it. I do not believe for an instant that this claim is sustainable...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.<sup>vi</sup>

The Capability Approach thus raises two questions. First, we want to know why capability is itself of value—if, indeed, it is. Secondly, assuming that capability is at least sometimes intrinsically valuable, we want to know which capabilities contribute to well-being and why. Sen declines to provide a criterion for distinguishing good, excellent and superb alternatives from bad, awful and gruesome ones or for distinguishing those capabilities which contribute significantly to well-being from those that do not: the Capability Approach is an “approach” rather than a complete account of well-being.

As a response to the dogmatic identification of the social good with per capita GDP and as a framework for setting policy, the Capability Approach is illuminating. As a philosophical account of prudential value it is either incomplete or implausible. Without any criterion for distinguishing those capabilities that are of significant value from those which contribute little or nothing to well-being it is incomplete; fortified with an objective list of Central Human Functional Capabilities such as Nussbaum's it is, at best, controversial and, arguably, insensitive to individual differences. Moreover Nussbaum's account of the requisites for human flourishing in particular is irreducibly pluralistic.

“Subjective welfarism” by contrast has the virtue of being both monistic and subjective. If we can produce an alternative account of prudential value that has these virtues while avoiding the problem of adaptive preference, an account which can explain why capability is intrinsically valuable, and which can solve the problem of adaptive preference, so much the better. Broad preferentism is that theory.

### 3 Broad Preferentism

Broad Preferentism is a subjective account of prudential value insofar as it affirms what Richard Arneson calls *agent sovereignty*—the doctrine that "what is good for each person is entirely determined by that very person's evaluative perspective."<sup>vii</sup> On Broad Preferentist account however an individual's evaluative perspective includes not only her actual preference-ranking but her preferences at other nearby possible worlds. A state of affairs contributes to an individual's well-being if it satisfies her actual preferences or preferences she "could easily have had," that is, those she has at "nearby" possible worlds, where her basic psychology and circumstances are similar to those she has at the actual world. Capabilities as well as achieved functionings are of value because they are instances of possible preference-satisfaction and, on the current account, possible as well as actual preference satisfaction contributes to well-being. On the broad preferentist account:

A state, *S*, contributes to an individual, *i*'s well-being at a world, *w*, iff either (1) at *w*, *i* prefers *S* and *S* obtains at *w* or (2) at *w*, *i* prefers *S* and there is a nearby possible world, *w'*, at which *S* obtains or (3) there is a nearby possible world, *w'*, at which *i* prefers *S* and *S* obtains at *w'*

(1) says that the satisfaction of our actual preferences contributes to well-being—a view that all preferentists, whether narrow or broad, accept. (2) says that if we prefer *S* then the option of getting it, even if we choose not to exercise that option out of "commitment," makes us better off. (3) says that if our desiring *S* is a nearby possibility then even though we do not actually prefer or choose it, we are better off for having the capability of getting it. In every case what contributes to well-being is preference satisfaction broadly construed as the conjunction of a preference for a state of affairs and that state of affairs' obtaining—*though not necessarily at the actual world or even at the same world*. Broad preferentism is therefore a monistic theory: only (actual or possible) preference-satisfaction makes us better off.

It remains to be seen *how much* better off. Intuitively, even if we grant that the capability of getting things we do not actually want contributes to our well-being, the capability of getting things we do want contributes more. On the current account, the extent to which a state of affairs,  $S$ , contributes to an individual's well-being is a function of the "distance" from the actual world to the closest world at which she both prefers and chooses  $S$  and  $S$ 's *fruitfulness*, that is the range of valued states with which  $S$  is compatible: the closer the world at which an individual chooses  $S$  and the wider the range of valued options with which  $S$  is compatible, the more the capability of getting  $S$  contributes to her well-being. States are of value, therefore, with respect to *centered worlds*, that is, possible worlds centered on individuals at times, and a state of affairs contributes to an individual's well-being in a world at a time to the extent that it (i) is relevant, (ii) obtains at a nearby world and (iii) is fruitful. We understand these conditions as follows:

**(i) Relevance:** A state,  $S$ , is relevant to an individual's well-being at a world,  $w_0$ , to a degree commensurate with the distance from  $w_0$  to the closest world,  $w_i$  at which she prefers  $S$ .

A world is close to  $w_0$  to the extent that it is a world in which the psychology and circumstances of the individual on which  $w_0$  is centered are similar to her psychology and circumstances at  $w_0$ . I have no interest in online role-playing games but, given the sort of person I am and my circumstances, I know that I could easily get hooked: there is a nearby possible world at which I prefer online role-playing and so that activity is relevant for me. I have no interest in ballet either but even beyond that, given my tastes and circumstances, there is no way I could get hooked on it: the world at which I prefer ballet is remote and so ballet-going irrelevant to me.

The capability of attaining states that are relevant to me contributes to my well-being and, all other things being equal, contributes to a degree commensurate with the distance of the world at which I prefer the states in question. Since the actual world is closest to itself, the

capability of attaining states I actually prefer contributes most to my well-being. However the capability of attaining states that I “could easily” prefer—those I prefer at nearby possible worlds—also contributes. The availability of a variety of amenities in my area of which I don’t take advantage but might easily want to use—beaches, parks and a wide range of restaurants and bars—contributes to my well-being.

By contrast, the capability of achieving states that I only prefer at remote worlds does not contribute significantly to my well-being. I not only actively dislike any activity in which I have to sit in an audience: I would have to be a very different sort of person to prefer such activities—my aversion to these activities is modally *deep*. The availability of concert halls, movie theaters and sports stadiums in my area contributes nothing to my well-being since worlds at which I like going to concerts, to the movies or to sports events are remote. But that’s only me. Broad preferentism is a subjective theory. The relevance of the capability for attaining some state, *S*, to an individual’s well-being is determined by that individual’s evaluative perspective, understood here as his transworld preference structure: lots of people like going to the movies.

It seems likely that there are important interpersonal similarities in the transworld structure of our preferences because, as members of the same species with the same evolutionary history, we humans are importantly similar. Even if our actual preferences are formed, or deformed, by our culture and personal circumstances, for most of us there are nearby (if not actual) worlds at which we like animals, enjoy music, have a taste for sweets and desire most of the items on Nussbaum’s list. On the current account, however, what *makes* the capability of attaining these states good for us is just our preferring them at nearby possible worlds. Even if an objective list like Nussbaum’s represents a good educated guess about what most people prefer at nearby possible worlds, including the actual world, it is conceivable and indeed likely, that some people’s preferences at actual and nearby possible

worlds are different: if this is so then on the current account the capabilities on the list do not contribute significantly to their well-being.

All other things being equal, the more relevant a preference is for us the more the capability of satisfying it contributes to our well-being. Capability however, like relevance, is also a matter of degree:

**(ii) 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. The greater the distance between a world,  $w$ , and the closest world,  $w'$ , at which a state  $S$  obtains, the less capable  $i$  is of attaining  $S$  at  $w$ . An individual is capable of attaining  $S$  at  $w$  to degree 1 if  $S$  obtains at  $w$  and to a lesser degree, between 0 and 1 if it obtains at some “nearby” non-actual possible world—a world in the neighborhood of  $w$ . If he is not capable of getting  $S$  then we may say that he is capable of getting it to degree -1.<sup>1</sup>

Capability as understood here is a relative modality: amongst those states of affairs that are logically possible, there is a restricted range of states, which I am capable of achieving (to some non-zero degree) and a boundary, perhaps fuzzy, between those states which obtain at nearby possible worlds and so represent “real possibilities” for me and those which are no more than logically possible. It is logically possible for me to run a 4-minute mile but that is not something that I am capable of doing. I am capable of running a 10-minute mile; whether or not I am capable of running a 7-minute mile I do not know. On the current

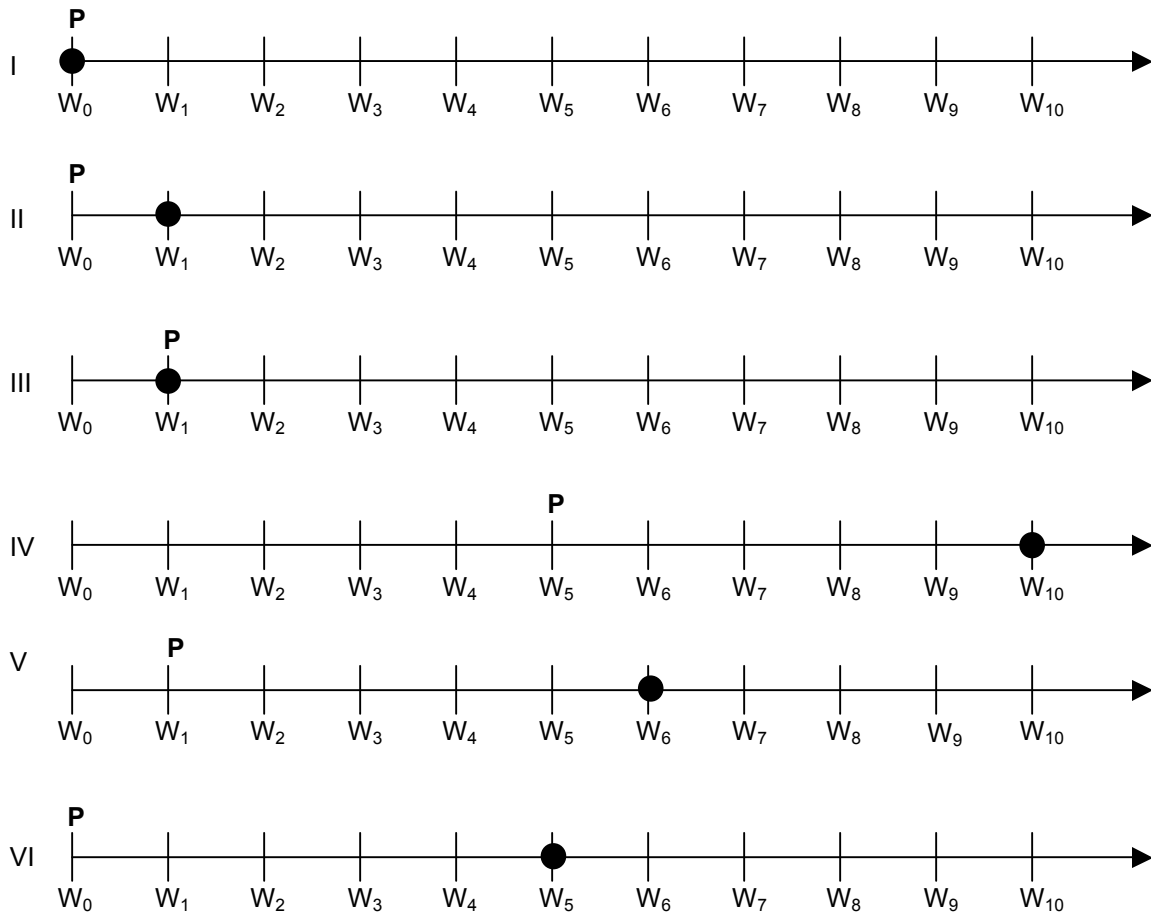
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<sup>1</sup> Why assign these numbers? Because we want to accommodate two intuitions. First, we conceive of actually  $\phi$ -ing the limiting case of the capability of  $\phi$ -ing. Capabilities and attainments both benefit us not because they are two different categories of goods which contribute independently to well-being but because attainment is in effect capability to the highest degree. If  $\phi$ -ing is good for me then having the capability of  $\phi$ -ing is good for me: that capability is good for me just *because*  $\phi$ -ing is good for me, and the extent to which that capability contributes to my well-being depends upon the extent to which *actually*  $\phi$ -ing contributes to my well-being. As Sen notes, it is not capability as such that makes us better off but the capability of attaining valued states. Secondly, we note that the incapability of attaining valued states makes us worse off and, arguably, undermines our well-being even if we do not know that we are blocked from attaining such states or feel frustration.

account, actual preference-satisfaction is the capability of achieving one's preferred state to the highest degree. The higher the degree of capability I have of attaining a state I prefer the more it contributes to my well-being so actually satisfying my preference for *S* contributes more than the mere capability of satisfying my preference.<sup>viii</sup>

As Sen suggests I may prefer a state and be capable of attaining it but forgo satisfying my preference out of "commitment"—preference is not tantamount to choice. However, the capability of attaining a preferred state, even if I choose not to exercise it, contributes to my wellbeing. Fasting, Sen notes, is quite a different thing from starving. On the current account, given that I prefer to eat, fasting is better for me than starving since when I fast I have the capability of eating. However, eating is better than fasting: when we act out of commitment we typically sacrifice some degree of well-being.

All other things being equal, the extent to which a state, *S*, contributes to an individual's well-being at a world, *w*, is a function of the relevance of *S* to his well-being and the degree to which he is capable of attaining *S* at the closest world, *w'*, at which he prefers it. 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. Let us assume, arbitrarily, that my capability extends only to worlds that are no more than four worlds away so if I prefer a state, *S*, at *w* and the world closest to *w* at which *S* obtains is more than four worlds away, then I am not capable of satisfying my preference for *S*. Let  $w_0$  be the actual world, let  $w_1 \dots w_{10}$  represent worlds in order of increasing distance from  $w_0$  and consider the following cases:



In Case I, I actually prefer  $S$  and satisfy my preference: this is as good as it gets. In Case II, I prefer  $S$  and am capable of getting it, but forgo  $S$  out of commitment. I am, therefore, less well off since my preference for  $S$  at  $w_0$  is only satisfied, say, to degree 0.9 rather than to degree 1. How much less well off? We could stipulate that the amount of well-being a state,  $S$ , contributes to an individual,  $i$ , at a world,  $w$ , is the product of  $S$ 's relevance for  $i$  at  $w$ , the degree to which  $i$  is capable of attaining  $S$  at  $w$  and  $S$ 's fruitfulness for  $i$ . It does not matter for our purposes here how we do the math so long as we recognize that the value of mere capabilities may be greater than zero, that an individual's capability of achieving a state,  $S$ , is only of value if he prefers  $S$  at some nearby world, that the closer the world at which he both prefers and gets  $S$  the better off he is and that the incapability of satisfying relevant preferences leaves him worse off.

In case III, the world at which I both prefer and attain  $S$  is nearby: I don't actually prefer  $S$  but could easily have preferred, and gotten,  $S$ . Since I prefer  $S$  at a nearby possible world,  $S$  is relevant to my well-being at  $w_0$  and I am better off because I have the capability of getting it. When I fly I pay extra for aisle seats so that I could, if I wanted to, get up and walk around without a hassle. Even when I do not actually get up and walk around, I regard that as money well-spent: having an escape route contributes to my well-being even if I don't use it.<sup>2</sup>

Case IV is more complex. At  $w_5$  I prefer  $S$  but am not capable of getting it since the closest world to  $w_5$  at which  $S$  obtains,  $w_{10}$ , is worlds away. At  $w_5$ , the capability of satisfying my preference is negative so I am badly off. However I am not badly off at the actual world,  $w_0$  because my merely possible preference for  $S$  is irrelevant:  $w_5$ , the world at which I prefer  $S$  is remote from the actual world. As things actually are with me, there is a remote possible

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<sup>2</sup> In *The House of the Dead* Dostoyevsky describes prisoners in a labor camp begging their overseers to "set them a task"—to give them piecework. He reports that even when the prisoners spent as long, or longer, at their assigned task than they would have spent working to the clock, they were well-satisfied. The mere possibility of knocking off earlier made them better off.

world at which I want to be like Paris Hilton. The world at which I am like Paris Hilton—stinking rich and famous for being famous—is immeasurably more remote so at the world in which I have that preference I am frustrated and badly off. However the preference itself is so remote from the way things with me at  $w_0$ , that its being frustrated makes no difference to me.

In Case V by contrast my frustrated possible preference for S is relevant to my well-being at the actual world because  $w_1$  is nearby. I am watching a riveting movie and have no desire to get up and go somewhere else or do anything else. Good thing I don't because I can't: I'm on a transatlantic flight. Still, I'm pretty badly off because I'm an antsy person for whom the desire to get up, walk around and do something else is always lurking at a very close possible world regardless of how much I like what I'm doing or how absorbed I am in a project. I like the movie and enjoy the ministrations of attentive flight attendants who periodically bring meals, drinks and nibbles and deliver hot towels with tongs, but I am not as well off as I would be watching that riveting movie at home where even though I *wouldn't* get up, walk around or do anything else, I *could*.

Case VI is the worst case scenario. I actually want S so that state is relevant to my well-being to the highest degree, but my capability of getting it is negative: given my inability to get S my preference for it makes me worse off.

The extent to which a given state contributes to my well-being thus depends on the distance of worlds at which I prefer it and get it. However we also want to know how *different* states contribute to well-being. Intuitively, all other things being equal, different states may contribute different amounts of well-being so that where individuals prefer different states, even when they get what they most want they may not be equally well off. I prefer being an academic and living the middle class life that attaches to that, with a house in a leafy suburb, a car, a Mac laptop and a chocolate lab; Jayamma, whose wants are modest, is content with a basic cinderblock dwelling the size of my living room, without a car, computer or dog. Some

people's preferences are not merely modest but positively perverse: there were ascetics in Late Antiquity who spent their lives on pillars or in hollow tree trunks and, more recently, there have been a spate of highly publicized cases of individuals clamoring to have healthy limbs amputated. Intuitively, even at the top of our respective preference rankings, even if we all get just what we want, I am better off than Jayamma and certainly better off than the ascetics or amputees.

This is a hard case for narrow preferentism, according to which the only means of making such interpersonal comparisons of well-being is via the "Zero-One Rule"—by settling the welfare value of states at the top and bottom states on individuals' preference-rankings to 1 and 0 respectively, and assigning values to intermediate states accordingly.<sup>ix</sup> On this account, all individuals at the tops of their actual preference-rankings are equally well off. This however seems manifestly false—and the broad preferentist can explain why without recourse to irreducibly objective criteria for betterness. Some states are more fruitful than others—they are compatible with a wider range of other states that satisfy individuals actual or nearby possible preferences. I am better off satisfying my preference for the life of a middle class academic than the ascetic is in satisfying his preference for living in a hollow tree trunk because the life I live is more *fruitful*.

**(iii) Fruitfulness:** the fruitfulness of a state,  $S$ , for an individual,  $i$ , at a world,  $w$ , is a function of

(a) the degree of *capability*  $S$  confers, that is, the range of states  $S_1 \dots S_n$  with which  $S$  is compatible and

(b) the extent to which each of the states,  $S_1 \dots S_n$  is *relevant* to  $S$ 's well-being

Broad preferentism is a subjective theory since the extent to which such states are relevant to an individual's well-being depends on her evaluative perspective. Nevertheless, the fruitfulness clause introduces an "objective" condition on well-being, (iiia), which accounts

for our conviction that *ceteris paribus*, regardless of anyone's preferences, some states are inherently better than others. On this account what makes such states better is their compatibility with a wider range of other states. All other things being equal states of affairs that diminish our capabilities make us worse off. Some people want healthy limbs amputated: we think that this is a lousy preference to have since satisfying it closes off possibilities.

On the current account, the states that are best objectively, *all other things being equal*, are those that enhance our capabilities and so expand the range of possible preference satisfaction. This not only backs our intuition that some states are inherently better than others regardless of what we actually prefer but it defines prudential value in the intuitively correct way. On this account push-pin is as good as poetry since the enjoyment of both of these activities is compatible with the same wide range of states, but *ceteris paribus* money, power and prestige are of more value than wisdom and virtue. Acquiring wealth, power and prestige expands the range of our capabilities. Acquiring wisdom, as distinct from technical competence and job skills, does not facilitate preference-satisfaction, and virtue may actually impede it: conscience makes cowards of us all.

One of the chief technical difficulties in the current account of well-being is the question of how we are to individuate and count states of affairs. As Sen notes "it is always possible to add trivially to the number of options." Arguably however we do not need to answer this question: intuitively some states expand our capabilities while others restrict them. Nevertheless, as Sen notes, even given a plausible procedure for counting the states we are capable of attaining, it is not merely the number of these states but their character that matters: the capability of achieving bad, awful and gruesome outcomes does not contribute significantly to our well-being. That is why the fruitfulness of a state does not depend only on the range of states with which it is compatible, regardless on what criterion we adopt for individuating and counting states, but on their relevance, as required by (iiib).

I have come into some money—not much, but enough to pay for either breast augmentation or a course in electronics technology at my local community college. Each alternative opens a range of career options for me. Breast augmentation opens the possibilities of working as a stripper, waitressing at Hooters and sex work; the electronics course opens a very different range of career options. Personally, I prefer a career in electronics and regard stripping, waitressing and whoring as bad, awful and gruesome alternatives, so I'm better off with the electronics course. But that's just me. There is nothing inherently better in being technician (or a philosopher) than in being a stripper: *de gustibus*. The current account accommodates that intuition.

Broad preferentism is thus a subjective theory. What distinguishes an individual's good, excellent and superb options from her bad, awful and gruesome ones is their relevance for her: alternatives which are compatible with a wide range of other states are *prima facie* better than those which close off options, but their fruitfulness for an individual depends on the extent to which those options are relevant to her, that is the distance of the world at which she prefers the states with which they are compatible. Consequently, it might be worthwhile for an individual to trade off a state that yields a wide range of options in which she has little interest for one that restricts her options, but provides a few opportunities that she prefers.

I can choose to train as an engineer or go to grad school in philosophy. A degree in engineering would open a wide range of career options to me; with a philosophy degree there is just one career path and I am not likely to have any choice about what job I take or where I live. Given the transworld structure of my preferences however, the wide range of options that would be open to me with an engineering degree are irrelevant: they do not satisfy preferences I have at any nearby possible worlds. The few options I would have with a philosophy degree by contrast are exactly what I want so that is what I choose: philosophy for me is the more fruitful alternative—the pearl of great price for which it is worth trading off a

wide range of other options. The range of options with which a state is compatible at a given world is an objective matter of fact but the fruitfulness of an option for an individual depends on that individual's actual and nearby possible preferences and hence on his evaluative perspective.

#### **4 Solving the adaptive preference problem: the content of preferences**

Since preference is what matters for well-being, albeit the way in which it matters is complex, individuals are always worse off for being unable to achieve states they prefer. However we can make people who cannot get what they want better off in two different ways: by adjusting their preferences or by improving their capabilities. Graphically, considering Case VI, this is the difference between sliding **P** to the right so that it is irrelevant and sliding **P** to the left so that the **P** is satisfied. Critics worry, with cause, that narrow preferentism cannot explain why one procedure is better than the other, and that preference utilitarianism as ordinarily understood gives the wrong answer. A traditional preference utilitarian looks for the cheapest way to secure desire satisfaction: if getting people to prefer what is on offer by brainwashing or doping is as effective as improving the circumstances of their lives and cheaper then that is what we should do. For the same reason, if disadvantaged individuals are satisfied with impoverished, oppressive conditions then we should certainly not pay the substantial costs involved in raising their consciousness and changing their life circumstances. This is Nussbaum's beef with "subjective welfarism": as she argues, eloquently and correctly, victims of "adaptive preference" are badly off even though they have successfully "adjusted" to deprivation and oppression.

Broad preferentism however can explain why life-improvement is better than life-adjustment in the cases where we, intuitively, believe that it is: it can solve the problem of adaptive preference. Expensive tastes are easily acquired: that is to say that even if disadvantaged individuals are indifferent between their meager and constrained

circumstances and what we should regard as more desirable conditions, the preference for a better life is lurking at nearby possible worlds.<sup>x</sup>

Consider Jayamma, one of Nussbaum's subjects, who works at the local kiln hauling bricks for a pittance, which her husband appropriates and spends as he pleases. As things actually stand, at  $w_0$ , she is satisfied with the arrangement—indifferent between it and other states of affairs. It would cost nothing to let Jayamma be and that is what traditional preference utilitarians will recommend: if she is at the top of her preference ranking then she is doing as well as privileged individuals who want more and get more, and better than affluent individuals who, because they have very expensive tastes are still not satisfied with much, much more. If maximizing overall *actual* desire-satisfaction is what we're after we should use the money we might have spent raising Jayamma's consciousness and improving her life circumstances to accommodate the expensive tastes of greedy individuals who are dissatisfied at much higher levels of consumption. Moreover if we are interested in equality we get the same result: to make greedy malcontents as well off as Jayamma is with her cinderblock house and job at the kiln, we should have to provide them with much, much more.

This seems wrong. Intuitively, we can get a bigger bang for the buck by investing in Jayamma than by providing luxury items for affluent malcontents, Broad preferentism explains why. Even though Jayamma is satisfied with her situation at  $w_0$ , she could easily prefer a better job at higher pay and control over the money she earns. That state of affairs is, however, out of reach, at  $w_5$  and broad preferentists recognize that even if Jayamma is at the top of her preference-ranking she is not as well off as more demanding individuals at the top of their preference-rankings because her preferred state is distinctly unfruitful and because she lacks the capability of achieving a wide range of other nearby possible preferences. On the current account, because Jayamma's preference for a better job, higher

pay and control over her earnings is nearby, at  $w_1$ , and so relevant to her well-being she is badly off—though not as badly off as she would be if she actually preferred this state of affairs. She would be better off if she had the capability of achieving this state. Moreover this state is fruitful: having better job and control over her earnings would open up a wide range of possibilities for further preference-satisfaction. That is why we should invest in Jayamma.

Of course, it is a matter of empirical conjecture whether the preference for better working conditions, higher pay and control over her earnings is a nearby preference for Jayamma or other poor women. It could be that they are so beaten down that their desire for a better life is remote. Nussbaum's stories about the response of poor women in developing countries to improved prospects however suggest otherwise. When the poor Indian women whose stories she tells see the benefits of joining women's co-ops and taking advantage of microcredit schemes they jump at the chance to participate—no elaborate therapeutic intervention or extensive personality remodeling is required. Their preferences for improved conditions are nearby and that is why we think it is worthwhile to improve the conditions of their lives. *Mutatis mutandis*, when the preference for "improved" conditions is *not* nearby, when it would take aggressive therapy, propaganda and extensive character remodeling to elicit or manufacture them, we question the value of life-improvement programs: we are skeptical about projects intended to reform preferences by advertisers, missionaries and political ideologues. The poor women whose stories Nussbaum tells are badly off because their preference for clean water, adequate nutrition, and basic social services are nearby while the means for satisfying these nearby possible preferences are out of reach.<sup>xi</sup>

On the current account, the content of preferences matters for well-being only to the extent that the states one prefers are more or less fruitful, that is, only insofar as the achieving these preferred states restricts or expands the scope of further preference satisfaction.

## 5 Where preferences come from

Critics of preferentist accounts of well-being nevertheless suggest that quite apart from questions about the content of preferences, the *origin* of preference matters, so that where the source of a person's preferences is tainted their satisfaction may not contribute to her well-being. The story is familiar. The advertising industry, a tool of capitalism, manufactures the taste for glitzy gadgets and designer jeans; 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, they suggest, does not contribute to well-being.

Still we note that, most preferences that are, allegedly, tainted by their origins are also questionable for other reasons. Glitzy gadgets end up gathering dust: people buy them on impulse, without becoming fully informed or engaging in the cool deliberation that preferentists recommend. Designer jeans are status symbols and, as utilitarians note, a widespread taste for such positional goods undermines overall utility and in the end leaves us all individually worse off. And life in fictional dystopias, where individuals are brainwashed, doped or bred to tow the party line is severely constrained.

In general, when we worry about the tainted origin of preferences it is usually possible to find something else wrong with them, which arguably accounts for the intuition that their satisfaction does not contribute to well-being. *Mutatis mutandis*, 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" into our children. In any case, discovering the origins of our preferences does not lead most of us to repudiate them or even feel that we ought to. Moralistic fulminations about the tainted origins of the preference for slimness, or for Western consumer products does not make women or adolescents in developing countries change their ways.

Arguably life-adjustment programs are suspect just because in the fictions and thought experiments where they figure as well as many factual cases, the preferences they induce are suspect on independent grounds. *All other things being equal* changing one's preferences to suit environmental conditions is no worse than modifying one's environment to satisfy prior preferences, as suggested by crucial thought experiments that scrupulously avoid introducing features which make induced preferences look bad on independent grounds.

Suppose I am going to spend some time in a place where the requisites for a normal American diet are expensive and hard to come by. I can pack a supply of frozen hamburgers, potato chips and coke to see me through or I can work to acquire a taste for native food. 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 in food, providing the costs and risks of taking the pill or having the operation are the same as the costs and risks of hauling a supply of junk food with me.

Moreover, our intuitions hold firm even where changing tastes to suit environmental conditions comes about through social engineering or propagandizing others rather than self-cultivation. Suppose the climate is changing so that in the future, without deploying expensive agricultural technology, it will not be possible grow the kinds of foods that will allow our children to enjoy the diet to which we are accustomed. In the interests of preference satisfaction we can either invest in the technology or train our children to prefer rice to potatoes and garbanzo beans to peas. Again, if the costs and risks are the same, there seems to be no reason why we should invest in technology to satisfy current tastes rather than changing tastes to suit a changing environment. Indeed, given the costs of technology

and the impact of our patterns of consumption on the environment it seems that we most certainly *should* work on changing our preferences and the preferences of others.

Finally, where changing individuals' tastes provides *more* options for desire satisfaction, we actively applaud the project. People intentionally cultivate tastes for fine wine and high art. Expensive tastes may impose a burden on society, but most of us 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. We not only engage in self-cultivation: we train our children to appreciate the finer things and clamor for educational programs, public broadcasting projects and community services to elevate the tastes of the general public.

If this is correct then *all other things being equal* adapting our preferences, and those of others, to suit life circumstances is no worse than adapting our environment to suit preferences: *ceteris paribus*, wanting what you get is as good as getting what you want. The problem is that all things are rarely equal.

## **6 The Restaurant at the End of the Universe**

Some preferences are perverse: they are preferences for states of affairs that would be, for most of us, utterly fruitless. A number of otherwise reasonable people are avid to have healthy limbs amputated, a preference which is not only remote from most of us but which, if satisfied, would prevent them from achieving a wide range of (what we assume to be) their actual and nearby possible preferences. Is it ever worth having a healthy limb amputated? On the current account it depends on whether that is what an individual wants and on how important the capabilities he would lose are from his evaluative perspective, that is, how close the worlds at which he wants to do the things that only people with both arms and legs intact can do to the actual world.<sup>xii</sup> Are there any circumstances in which an individual is better off dead—for most of us, a uniquely fruitless option? On the current account, that

depends on their preferences—not only on whether they want to be dead but on the opportunity costs of being dead—whether death blocks the satisfaction of relevant actual or nearby possible preferences.

In the *Restaurant at the End of the Universe* animals are bred to prefer being eaten. Animals who prefer being eaten are badly off whatever happens: if they are not eaten their actual preferences remain unsatisfied; if they are eaten, their deaths close off the possibility of any further preference satisfaction—though this may not be so bad on the current account if, perhaps as a consequence of their breeding, they have no nearby possible preferences for states of affairs that would be blocked by their deaths. Even so, on the current account, it is better to want more and get more, and always better, from the prudential point of view, to be greedy and rich than to be modest and satisfied with less.

Intuitively, animals who do not want to be eaten and are not eaten are better off than animals who want to be eaten and satisfy *that* preference and Broad Preferentists can explain why. Not being eaten is compatible with a wide range of capabilities for the satisfaction of additional preferences; being eaten is not compatible with any capabilities. Having further actual or nearby preferences and the capability of satisfying them is better than not having them and not satisfying them which is, in turn, better than preferring to survive but having a range of actual and nearby possible preferences frustrated by slaughter. Not being eaten is better than being eaten, but if you are going to be eaten anyway then you are better off preferring that outcome.

If this is correct than preferentism broadly construed to admit the contribution of merely possible preference satisfaction to well-being, supports our intuitions regarding such cases and solves the problem of adaptive preference. 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 nearby possible preferences contributes to well-being.

Broad preferentism thus sets the agenda for what most of us 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 correct account of well-being.

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> Martha Nussbaum. *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 117.

<sup>iii</sup> 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.

<sup>iv</sup> Amartya Sen, "Capabilities and Well-Being" in Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.33

<sup>v</sup> See Capabilities and Functionings briefing, Human Development and Capability Association at <http://www.capabilityapproach.com/PubList.php?intro=yes&sid=762b07f875fe3c9bcd9d450667b19031>

Capabilities are "the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for [a person] to achieve." Put differently, they are "the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value. Capabilities are a kind of opportunity freedom. Just like a person with much money in her pocket can buy many different things, a person with many capabilities could enjoy many different activities, pursue different life paths. For this reason the capability set has been compared to a budget set. So capabilities describe the real actual possibilities open to a person."

<sup>vi</sup> Sen, "Capability and Well-Being," pp. 34-5

<sup>vii</sup> Richard Arneson. "Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction" in *Human Flourishing*, Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 116.

<sup>viii</sup> How much does mere capability matter? The extent to which a preferred state of affairs contributes to an individual's well-being at a world,  $w$ , is a function of distance between  $w$  and the world at which he prefers that state and it obtains. Intuitions about the shape of this function vary widely. Some people think that even states that satisfy preferences at very close possible worlds don't matter very much so that the graph of the well-being function drops off precipitously once we move beyond the actual world. Other people are modally risk-averse: we feel that the mere possibility of satisfying preferences we might have had, however remote those possibilities, is really important. Broad preferentism only says that the possible satisfaction of some merely possible preferences sometimes contributes to well-being: we leave open the question of what shape the function takes.

<sup>ix</sup> See Hausman, 1995, Weintraub, 1996, Hausman, 1997, and [reference to author paper suppressed for review]

<sup>x</sup> I'm assuming that in the real life circumstances Nussbaum describes, victims of adaptive preference do not actually prefer deprivation to more favorable circumstances because this is what

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the stories she tells suggests. The women she describes whose preferences she claims have been “deformed” are *at most* indifferent between the conditions of their lives and what we should regard as improvements: they do not think that it is worthwhile trying for improved conditions. Nussbaum’s stories however do not provide any reason to think that they strictly prefer the conditions of their lives or that, given the opportunity, they would reject higher wages, better working conditions, better sanitation and health care or more control over their money.

<sup>xi</sup> See Nussbaum 2000, pp. 113 ff. “I talked to women who were severely malnourished, and whose village had no reliable clean water supply. Before the arrival of a government consciousness-raising program, these women apparently had no feeling of anger or protest about their physical situation... Now their level of discontent has gone way up: they protest to the local government, asking for clean water, for electricity, for a health visitor. They protect their food supplies from flies, they wash their bodies more often. Asked what was the biggest change that the government program had brought to their lives, they immediately said, as if in chorus, “We are cleaner now.” Nussbaum’s take is that only the “normative approach” she recommends could have achieved this result and, in particular, that “utilitarian preference-based approaches” were inadequate to the task: the women, after all, didn’t actually mind filth, squalor and malnutrition: why try to induce more expensive taste—and then spend even more to satisfy them? Broad preferentism explains why.

<sup>xii</sup> Here is a true story. A friend visited an elderly aunt of hers who was diabetic and had just had her feet amputated because of complications. The aunt had “adjusted” beautifully and wasn’t in the least bothered. According to my friend, she had spent most of her adult life watching TV, and was looking forward to going into a retirement home where she could watch TV all day while carers “did for” her. She gave my friend various kitchen items and other stuff she wouldn’t be needing at the home and then a bunch of socks saying, with a good-natured chuckle, that she wouldn’t be needing them anymore. Worlds at which the aunt wanted to take up running, and even worlds where she preferred taking care of her own needs rather than depending on others to do for her, were remote. Given her evaluative perspective the capabilities she lost with the amputations had contributed little or nothing to her well-being.