

Life-Adjustment and Life-Improvement

Preferentists hold that preference-satisfaction alone contributes to well-being. If preferentism is true it seems to follow 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. This is a hard saying. We are skeptical about life-adjustment programs intended to reconcile individuals who live under oppressive conditions to their lot: intuitively, social improvement and political liberation are better than brainwashing or other interventions aimed at changing such individual's preferences to be satisfied by what is on offer.

Critics suggest that no subjective account of well-being, whether preferentist or hedonist, can explain our intuitions in these cases: unless we recognize that some states of affairs are objectively more conducive to well-being than others we cannot account for our conviction that life-adjustment is not the moral equivalent of life-improvement.¹ Can we accommodate this conviction without signing onto an objective account of well-being? I argue that we can, if we reject *welfare actualism*, the doctrine that only actual states of affairs contribute to well-being.

1 Against Welfare Actualism

An account of prudential value is "subjective" if it affirms *agent sovereignty*—the doctrine that "what is good for each person is entirely determined by that very person's evaluative perspective."² Preferentists have traditionally understood a person's "evaluative perspective" as his actual preference-ranking, so that individuals who attain states at the top of their respective preference-rankings are doing the best than can, and are equally well-off, regardless of whether their requirements are modest or demanding. *Prima facie* it seems that the only room for distinguishing preferred states as better or worse must be found in some objective betterness space in which the *content* of such states figures.

Preferentists can avoid this result by recognizing that capability, the effective freedom to satisfy merely possible preferences, contributes to well-being. In addition to saving agent sovereignty—a desirable outcome if we believe that subjective accounts of well-being are preferable to objective theories—there are independent reasons for rejecting welfare actualism. Amartya Sen has urged that capability, the effective freedom to achieve valued states, as well as actual "functionings" makes us better off. Arguably, apart from hedonists or others who hold that only states that figure in experience matter for well-being, most of us recognize that some mere possibilities are of value—and *mutatis mutandis* that no matter how good things actually are, the absence of freedom undermines well-being.

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 transatlantic flight. I like the movie, and I enjoy the ministrations of flight attendants who periodically deliver meals, nibbles and hot towels, 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*.

The intuition that *ceteris paribus* we are better off solely because we can do otherwise is not readily explained away. Granted we sometimes want to keep our options open as a hedge

¹ Vide, e.g. Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 117-118. "Embraced as a normative position, subjective welfarism makes it impossible to conduct a radical critique of unjust institutions; it forces us to say...that because the women in Andhra Pradesh don't agitate for medical care and clean water, they don't need those things...the problem of preference-deformation requires us to depart altogether from the utilitarian framework."

² 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.

against changing circumstances or changing preferences, in at least some cases we simply want those 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.³

Granting that at least some mere possibilities contribute to well-being, we can explain why the content of preferences matters without jettisoning agent sovereignty and, indeed, without abandoning the doctrine that well-being is to be understood as preference-satisfaction. Capability, the satisfaction of (actual and possible) preferences at nearby possible worlds contributes to well-being.

2 Relevance, Capability and Fruitfulness

Capability assumes a notion of restricted possibility that is narrower than logical possibility or, indeed, physical possibility. An armless person is incapable of playing the piano, even though it is logically possible to play piano with one's toes or, magically, by telekinesis; likewise, in the US a pauper is incapable of being elected to high political office. We assume therefore that from the perspective of any individual, *i*, there is a restricted range of possible worlds, which represent her "real possibilities," states compatible with the way things actually are with her. For a world, *w*, centered on *i* at *t*, there is a neighborhood of centered worlds, *W*, at which *i*'s psychology and circumstances are similar to those at *w*. *i* is *capable* of attaining a state, *S*, only if *S* obtains at a world in *W*, that is, a "nearby" possible world.⁴

Ceteris paribus, the wider the range of states with which a given state is compatible the better off a person is for attaining it. We can of course trivially expand the range of states with which a given state is compatible by adopting a more fine-grained criterion for individuating states of affairs. We do not however need to settle the metaphysical question of how to individuate states for our purposes. We recognize that some states are compatible with a wider range of states than others, even if there are cases about which we don't know what to say and we recognize that some states are, *ceteris paribus*, more conducive to well-being than others, even if there are cases about which we don't know what to say. As David Lewis notes we may reasonably "seek to rest an unfixed distinction upon a swaying foundation, claiming that the two sway together rather than independently"¹ *All other things being equal*, the contribution of a state to well-being sways with the extent of its compatibility with other states.

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 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

³ 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..

⁴ Note: this is only a necessary condition on capability, not intended to capture the notion of agency. This is all we need for the current discussion.

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'.⁵

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?

To maintain agent sovereignty, the value of a state for an individual must be entirely determined by her evaluative perspective. If however we reject welfare actualism we can understand a person's evaluative perspective to include not only her actual preference-ranking but preferences she could have had—those included in his preference-rankings at other possible worlds. Arguably the states of affairs that are of value to an individual are those she prefers at some nearby possible world. At nearby worlds, an individual's preferences, even if they are different from her actual preferences, are ones she "could easily have had." On the current account, it is the capability of satisfying "nearby" possible preferences—including actual preferences, since the actual world is closest to itself—that contributes to well-being.

Absorbed in the in-flight movie, I prefer to stay in my seat. But being an ansy 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. Consequently, I would be better off if I had the capability of getting up and doing something else. The capability of satisfying remote possible preferences contributes little or nothing to my well-being. I could take up sky-diving but, being deathly scared of heights, the world at which I prefer sky-diving is remote and so the capability of sky-diving contributes nothing to my well-being.

A state is *fruitful* for an individual to the extent that it is compatible with a wide range of states which satisfy her actual and nearby possible preferences.

We can summarize the view suggested here as follows:

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 she 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*.

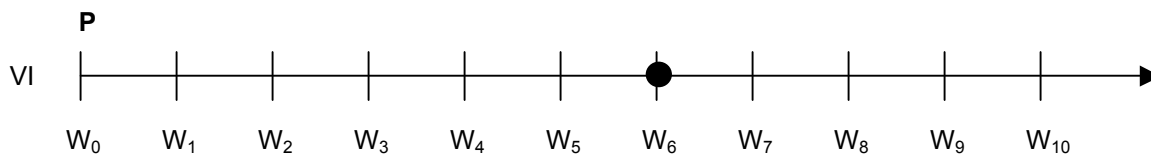
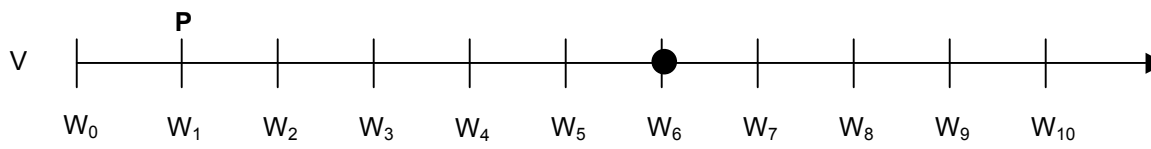
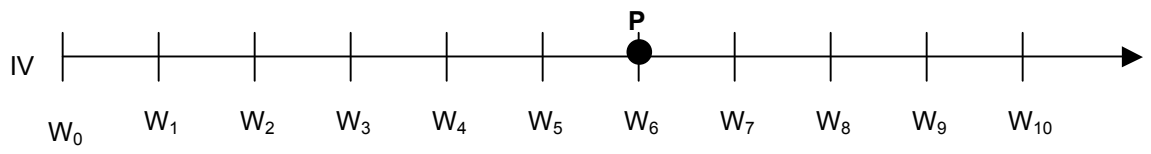
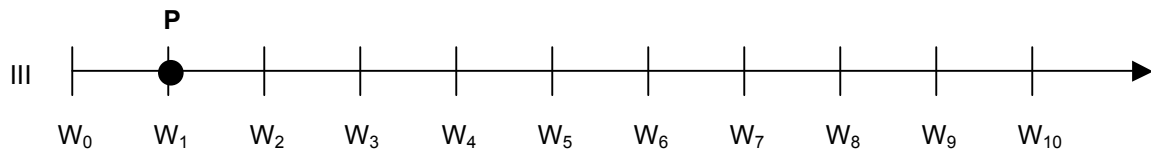
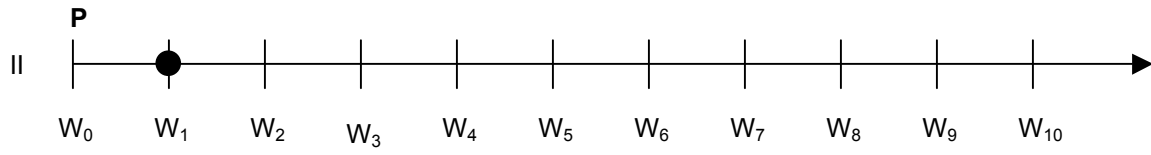
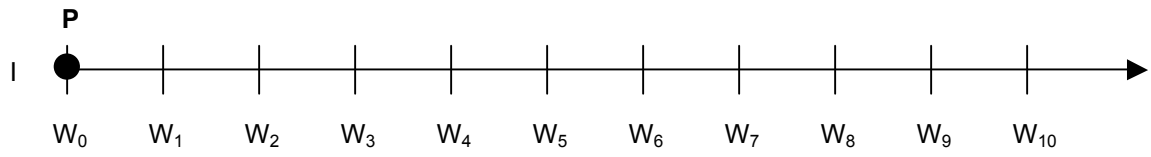
Intuitively we are best off satisfying our actual preferences but benefit to a lesser degree from the capability of satisfying nearby possible preferences and are worse off if we are incapable of

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

satisfying actual nearby possible preferences.⁶ 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 .

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. We won't worry at this point about the fruitfulness of S vis-à-vis other states: we're just looking at S . 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 $w_1 \dots w_{10}$ represent worlds in order of increasing distance from w_0 .

⁶ Again, we're ignoring the notion of agency and also any distinctions between those states in which an individual in some sense participates and those in which he does not participate and between mere Cambridge and other properties as don't-cares. On this account, counterintuitively, the earth's having a moon is a state I am capable of attaining, even though there's not a thing I can do about it one way or the other. Indeed, it is a state I'm capable of attaining to the highest degree since it is a state that actually obtains.



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*.⁷ 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.

3 How this solves the problem

Someone in a Case VI predicament can be made better off in two ways: by life-improvement or by life-adjustment, that is, by sliding “•” to the left so that he acquires the capability of attaining it or by sliding “P” to the right so that *S* is not relevant for him. If only actual preference-satisfaction contributes to well-being, there is no reason to recommend one procedure over the other: whether things change so that what I want becomes actual or so that I come to prefer what is on offer, I am equally well off. Intuitively however there is a range of cases in which I'm better off if the world changes so that I get what I want than I am if my preferences change so that I come to want what I get.⁸ The current account, which recognizes the contribution of possible preference-satisfaction to well-being, explains why in such cases life-improvement is better than life-adjustment.

Citizens dissatisfied with life in a totalitarian state can overthrow the regime or learn to love Big Brother. For most of us political liberty is a fruitful state: citizens of free societies enjoy a wider range of options than subjects of authoritarian regimes, and *most have actual or nearby preferences for these options*. Under the thumb of Big Brother, they lack the capability of satisfying those preferences and so are worse off.

Some people might not be as badly off with Big Brother. For individuals who are happy with their state-assigned jobs, who have no desire to travel or exercise free speech and dislike the hassle of making decisions, political liberty is not fruitful. Given their (transworld) evaluative perspectives, political liberty may not be an improvement.

Winston Smith however is like most of us: he is badly off because he is incapable of satisfying a variety of nearby possible preferences. Brainwashing may make him somewhat better off by shifting his preference for political liberty to non-actual possible world but he will still be badly off in virtue of his incapability of satisfying a wide range of nearby possible preferences. It induces him to prefer a state that is, for him, less fruitful than political liberty. Given his evaluative perspective, he is less well (actually) preferring life under the Regime and getting it than he would be preferring a different political arrangement and getting that.

⁷ 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.

⁸ There are also cases where it makes no difference and, arguably, cases where I would be better off acquiring and satisfying different preferences. The latter occurs in cases of “adaptive preference” considered by Nussbaum and Sen. I've argued elsewhere that the current account can handle these cases too. [Reference suppressed for blind review]

The Regime can avoid this result by *hyperbrainwashing*, which changes not only *actual* preferences but also nearby possible preferences. Through hyperbrainwashing Smith would not only come to love Big Brother but lose nearby possible preferences for states incompatible with life under the Regime. He would be in the same position as individuals who never aspired to the benefits of life in a free society, whether actual or nearby possible, and so are not any the worse off for their incapability of attaining them.

There are however opportunity costs for Smith. After hyperbrainwashing, though he no longer incurs the well-being *deficit* that comes from having nearby possible preferences which he is incapable of satisfying he does not get the benefits he *would* get if he had those nearby possible preferences and the capability of satisfying them. Desiring states we are incapable of attaining makes us worse off but the capability of attaining states we do not desire at any nearby possible world does not make us any better off.

So, we get the intuitively correct result. Smith would be best off with regime change, which would give him the capability of satisfying his preference for a state that is, for him, fruitful. Hyperbrainwashing, is second best: if both Smith's preference for political liberty and his nearby possible preferences for a range of states associated with it are shifted right, so that they are no longer relevant for him, his incapability of attaining these states does not make him worse off.⁹ He benefits less from simple brainwashing since his incapability of satisfying nearby possible preferences makes him worse off. He is least well off clear-headed, unbrainwashed and dissatisfied but incapable of attaining a wide range of actual and nearby possible preferences.

If we recognize that the capability of satisfying nearby possible preferences contributes to well-being then, *ceteris paribus*, life-improvement beats life-adjustment in cases like this. If however life-improvement is not feasible, we are better off brainwashed—and the more thoroughly brainwashed the better.

⁹ See Case IV