

*Against
boredom*

FRI TANKE

Against boredom

17 essays

ON IGNORANCE

VALUES

CREATIVITY

METAPHYSICS

DECISION-MAKING

TRUTH

PREFERENCE

ART

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HUMAN ILLS

SCIENCE

AND ETERNAL LIFE

TO NILS-ERIC SAHLIN

ON THE OCCASION

OF HIS 60TH BIRTHDAY

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Is preference primitive?

KEVIN MULLIGAN

Preference, according to many theories of human behaviour, is a very important phenomenon. It is therefore somewhat surprising that philosophers of mind pay so little attention to it. One question about preference concerns its *variety*. Is preference always preference for one option or state of affairs rather than another? Or is there also, as ordinary language suggests, object-preference – preferences for one person rather than another, for one country rather than another, for one value rather than another? Another question or rather group of questions concerns the *nature* of preference. Is it a mental state, disposition, act or episode, a theoretical construct, a purely behavioural phenomenon? If it is a mental state or act, is it an intellectual, affective or a conative phenomenon? If it is an affective phenomenon, does it enjoy a positive or negative “valence”? Is preference to be understood as a relation between a person’s attitudes or is it a primitive phenomenon?

Unsurprisingly, answers to these questions are often not independent of one another. In what follows, I put forward some reasons for thinking that there are three distinct types of preference and contrast two views about the nature of preference, the view that preference is not itself an intentional state but a relation between intentional states and the view that preference is mentally or psychologically primitive and enjoys its own form of intentionality. The suggestions advanced in what follows are, I hope, controversial. They are certainly not defended as fully as they ought to be.

Two major *types* of preference ascription are the instances of

(1) x prefers to F rather than to G

and of

(2) x prefers that p rather than that q

To prefer to F rather than to G is to prefer one option, one course of action, to another, to prefer to travel widely rather than to read widely, to prefer to smoke rather than not to. But one may think that this preference is just to prefer *that* one travels widely rather than that one reads widely, *that* one smokes rather than that one does not smoke. Then it seems that instances of (1) are merely a special case of type (2), which might be called propositional preference. But instances of (2) range over many things other than options. They range over outcomes and many other types of states of affairs. One may, for example, prefer that society be arranged in one way rather than another. Similarly, one's preferences for certain preferences rather than others, certain emotions rather than others, are typically propositional preferences.

The term "propositional preference" (cf "propositional knowledge"), like my reference to states of affairs, may suggest that instances of (2) should be understood as relations between a subject, on the one hand, and two states of affairs or propositions, on the other hand. But there is a less baroque way of understanding instances of (2), which goes back to Prior: "prefers that . . . rather than that . . ." may be understood as a prenective or hybrid connective, which takes a name and two sentences to make a sentence. The semantic value of such a hybrid connective, on this view, is no relation but what might be called a hybrid connector, something which resembles a relation at one end only.

One reason for thinking that instances of (1) are not simply special cases of (2) may be brought out by considering a possible analogy with the structure of intentions. For Sam to want, intend (will, *wollen*) to smoke may seem at first glance to amount to nothing more than that Sam wants or intends that *he himself* smokes. But this intro-

duces into what is intended a type of reference to a subject which is not explicitly present in the intention to smoke. In one jargon, the reference to oneself is not *thematic* or explicit in intentions. In another jargon, the subject is an *unarticulated constituent* of what is intended. If this suggestion is plausible, it seems equally plausible to say that to prefer to smoke rather than to sing is not an instance of (2). But the analogy between intending and option preference is a limited one. There is a well-known argument in favour of the view that to intend (will, desire) is in fact to *intend that*. To intend to smoke is to intend to smoke sooner rather than later or the day after tomorrow etc. What do such temporal specifications qualify? Not “intend”. But, as far as I can see, no such argument can be deployed to show that option preference – where this is not understood in terms of choosing or deciding – is really a type of propositional preference.

Whether or not instances of (1) are special cases of (2), ordinary language suggests that there is a distinct type of preference, object-preference. Consider the catalogue given by the Cracow poet Wislawa Szymborska in “Possibilities”

I prefer movies.
I prefer cats.
I prefer the oaks along the Warta.
I prefer Dickens to Dostoyevsky.
I prefer myself liking people
to myself loving mankind.
[...]
I prefer moralists
who promise me nothing.
I prefer cunning kindness to the over-trustful kind.
I prefer the earth in civvies.
I prefer conquered to conquering countries.
I prefer having some reservations.
I prefer the hell of chaos to the hell of order.
I prefer Grimms' fairy tales to the newspapers' front
pages.
I prefer leaves without flowers to flowers without leaves.
I prefer dogs with uncropped tails.
I prefer light eyes, since mine are dark.
I prefer desk drawers.

I prefer many things that I haven't mentioned here
to many things I've also left unsaid.

[...]

Most of the preferences alluded to in the full version of this poem do not range over options or states of affairs but over objects (including pluralities of objects). There seem to be many types of object-preference, of x preferring y to z . One may prefer Sam to Hans, Venice to Florence, claret to Burgundy, Austrian philosophy to German philosophy; liberty to social justice; the gracefulness of Giorgio's gait to Sam's clumsiness, the legitimacy of one's nation-state to the illegitimacy of the Belgian Empire, Robert Musil's Austrian irony to Thomas Mann's Teutonic kitsch, the hell of chaos to the hell of order. And so on. Object-preferences, then, seem to be three-place relations. And, as we have seen, it is not necessary to say the same of preferences that p rather than that q .

The fact that so little attention is paid to the category of object-preference in theories of preference is probably due to the suspicion that, just as preferences of type (1) seem to be special cases of type (2), so too, examples of object-preference should be seen as special cases of type (2). Preference, it may well be thought, is essentially propositional. Von Wright expresses a suspicion of this kind:

What is it to "prefer" country A to country B ? [...] Is it not to prefer to visit A or to live in A or to trade with A , or something similar? Generally speaking: is it not to prefer a state of affairs with regard to A to a corresponding state of affairs with regard to B ?

What is a person doing when he prefers apples to pears? There are many possible answers. Perhaps he likes the taste of apples better. So he prefers the taste of apples better. So, he prefers the taste of apples to the taste of pears. The state which is characteristic of a fruit is a quality or property of the fruit. Properties, like states of affairs, are proposition-like entities.

But what is it to prefer apple-taste to pear-taste, or to put it more generally, one quality to another? ... In answer to the general question, one might say that to prefer one quality to another means, roughly, to prefer a state when

the one quality is instantiated to a state when the other is

It thus seems to be the case that preferences between states of affairs are more basic than preferences between things, in the sense that when we explicate the meaning of a preference of the second type we do it in terms of preferences of the first type. And it also seems to be the case that preferences between states of affairs are more basic than preferences between qualities of things. But I shall not maintain that this is always and necessarily so (von Wright 1983 "The Logic of Preference Reconsidered", *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. II 70)

Von Wright, then, refrains from asserting that preference is always and necessarily (what I have called) propositional preference yet thinks that it seems to be the case that preferences between states of affairs are more basic than preferences between things. But consider a preference for Sweden rather than France. Is such a preference really always to prefer to *F* in a Sweden involving way rather than to *F* in a France involving way? One possible answer to the question: "Why do you prefer to live in/visit/. . . Sweden rather than to live in/visit/. . . France?" is surely: "I prefer Sweden to France". In such cases, the preference which is motivated cannot be the preference which motivates. But one who is sceptical about the pervasiveness or fundamentality of object-preference may well concede this but go on to claim that to prefer Sweden to France must nevertheless be understood in terms of some option preferences involving the two countries. It is true that the causal genesis of a preference for Sweden over France may be activities involving both countries. But that does not rule out the possibility that an option preference be motivated by an object preference.

Scepticism about the fundamentality of object preference may also lead one to think that value preference, to prefer freedom to social justice, is just to prefer that the first value be realised or exemplified rather than that the second value be realised or exemplified. But, once again, a good answer to the question: "Why do you prefer that freedom be realised rather than equality?" is surely: "Because I prefer freedom to equality".

What is it to prefer, what is the *nature* of preference? One answer is suggested by comparative locutions such as “liking more than”, “hating less than”, “admiring more than”. Suppose Sam is very pleased that *p* and slightly pleased that *q*. Does this not suffice for it to be the case that Sam prefers that *p* rather than that *q*? Sam’s preference, we might say, is determined by the degrees of his being pleased. Sam’s preference looks like an internal relation between two degrees of being pleased. Suppose Sam is pleased that *p* and displeased that *q*. Once again his preference seems to be an internal relation. But in contrast to the first case his preference is determined by the nature of his two attitudes. Preference understood in this way as an internal relation has a number of distinctive features. Sam’s preferences resemble one type of doxastic property – the property someone has when she believes that *p* and believes that *q*. To believe that *p* and to believe that *q* is not to believe that *p* and *q*. A conjunction of beliefs is not any sort of belief. Similarly, one might think, the conjunction of the two attitudes in Sam, being very pleased that *p* and slightly pleased that *q*, does not determine any attitude on Sam’s part at all. The conjunction determines what is often called a preference. But preference understood in this way is not any sort of mental state or act since it is a mere relation between mental states or acts and their features, an internal relation.

That this is the case is also strongly suggested by certain views about the intentionality of attitudes and other mental acts and states. On one such view, if Sam is very pleased that *p*, then he takes it to be good or valuable, in particular, pleasant or agreeable that *p* – he has an impression of value. Similarly, if something pleases Sam, he takes it to be pleasant. If it pleases him very much, he takes it to be very pleasant. If he admires Maria, he takes her to be admirable, perhaps courageous, or generous. If his attitude towards Jürgen is one of contempt, he takes Jürgen to be despicable. And so on. According to a development of this view, the different affective attitudes and their axiological correlates are related in the following way: attitudes are correct iff their objects exemplify certain value properties. Then to be pleased by something is correct iff it is pleasant;

indignation that p is correct iff it is unjust that p ; shame about some past deed is correct iff the deed was shameful. And so on.

If that is the case, then it is plausible to say that a preference that p rather than that q is correct iff it is better that p than that q . But from the fact that Sam is very pleased that p and slightly pleased that q it does not follow that Sam has any impression that it is better that p than that q . Indeed not only might Sam lack the concept of betterness he might lack any acquaintance with comparative value. Thus if we say that Sam's two degrees of being pleased determine a preference, we should not say that this preference is any sort of affective mental state which enjoys intentionality.

The view that internal relations between attitudes and their degrees suffice for preference fits some cases better than others. Consider a world in which the only affective phenomena are degrees of being pleased and being displeased. In such a world a person's preferences are easily determined. (But even in this world we may wonder whether the attitudes which determine a subject's preferences have to be simultaneous). This world is the real world according to one philosophy of emotions. According to a very different philosophy, positive and negative emotions come in qualitatively different kinds; admiring, approving and adoring, say, are qualitatively different. Suppose x admires z enormously at t and adores y a little at t . It is by no means obvious that these two facts determine a preference. If one thinks that emotions differ not only in degree and kind but may also be more or less deep, then it appears that emotions determine preferences only in certain very simple cases.

Is there a mentalist alternative to the view that preferences are internal relations between attitudes? Such an alternative will presumably take seriously such phenomena as impressions of betterness and, in particular, the intentionality of such impressions.

One such impression is that one person (thing, animal, country) is better, more beautiful, useful, elegant, healthy, ... than the second. Here the axiological relation is an external relation. A related type of impression is that one

value is more important, a higher value, than another value. Nietzsche, for example, had the distinct impression that the value of life is more important than the value of knowledge or truth. Here the axiological relation is an internal relation. But it is an internal relation which should not be confused with the internal relations between the degrees of value (positive, negative, indifference) of things and persons, which, on one plausible view, are part of the make-up of contingent relations of value between objects. (Compare the difference between the external relation of being more or less expensive than and internal relations between prices, and the difference between the external relation of similarity between things and internal relations of distance between qualities). The different axiological relations between objects correspond to similar relations between options and states of affairs.

What, now, are impressions of betterness and importance? Such impressions may occur without explicit comparisons or on the basis of such comparisons. What is an impression of betterness? One answer is that such an impression is a judgment, in particular a judgment to the effect that one thing is better than another. Similarly, it has often been argued that emotions are just evaluative judgements. Suppose we are convinced by the arguments against the view that to emote is to judge, many of which resemble the arguments against the view that to see is to judge. Such arguments strongly suggest that impressions of betterness need not be judgmental either. What might an impression of betterness or importance be if it is not a judgment or belief?

Perhaps an impression of betterness or importance is just a preferring. Preferring one thing to another is correct only if it is better than the other thing. The formal object of such preferring is betterness. Preferring one value to another is correct only if the first value is higher in value or more important than the second value. The formal object of such preferring is value height. Similarly, it is often thought, as we have noted, that different monadic values figure in the correctness conditions for different types of emotion (indignation and injustice, shame and shameful-ness). This last claim is often combined with the view that

only emotions can reveal or disclose value properties. That seems to me to be wrong. Emotions are typically motivated and triggered by impressions of value which precede them. It is not inconsistent with this claim to think that only preferring can reveal or disclose betterness. For preferring is not an emotion. They are affective phenomena – one’s heart turns in one direction rather than another – but they are not emotions. Emotions are attitudes but preferring is not an attitude. Preferring has no polar opposite. In this respect, they resemble judgments rather than beliefs. For judgments, if Bolzano and Frege are to be believed, have no opposites, although belief is opposed to disbelief, and certainty to uncertainty. Preferring has no “valence”, they are neither *pro* nor *contra* anything. In this respect, they resemble surprise. A preferring is an episode, unlike a preference. The relation between preferring and preferences resembles the relation between judgments and beliefs. A judgment typically marks the beginning of a belief. Similarly, episodic preferring may mark the beginnings of the states and dispositions we call preferences.

The suggestion that preferring and the preferences to which they give rise are the best candidate for the rôle of impressions of betterness and of importance has two interesting features. First, it complements the popular view that emotions or other affective phenomena (for example, *Wertfühlen*, the phenomenon of being struck by value) reveal or disclose monadic value. Emotions or impressions of monadic value and preferring, including value-preferring, have as their objective counterparts the full range of axiological objects, properties, relations and connectors: positive and negative value, beauty and ugliness, the relation of betterness, the relation of being more elegant than, value-height, the state of affairs that it is worse or more shameful or more unjust that *p* than that *q*, and the state of affairs that it is worse to *F* than to *G*. Secondly, the suggestion immediately provides an answer to the question about the origin or source of the concepts of betterness and importance. These concepts, the answer goes, have their origins in preferring and in their “intentional objects”. An alternative view of the origin of the concept of betterness is that this concept depends on a grasp of the

concept of monadic value and on the concept of more or less. But it is not obvious what a parallel account of the origin of the concept of importance or value-height would look like.

What is the relation between preferring, understood as a fully intentional episode, and other affective phenomena such as emotions or being struck by value? If, as is sometimes claimed, betterness is more fundamental than monadic value, preferring might be independent of all other affective phenomena. Another possibility is that preferring presupposes other kinds of affective phenomena. The formation of a preference for one thing rather than another presupposes some grasp of the value-properties of the two things. As we have noted, such a grasp may be taken to be disclosure by emotion or some other type of value impression. This grasp may also be purely conceptual, as when we come to prefer one thing to another on the basis of knowledge by description. But it may also be wholly intuitive as when Giorgio, on the basis of a rapid examination of two new handbags from Milan, plumps for the one rather than the other. And, of course, many different combinations of conceptual information and impressions may provide the starting point for preferring.

The two accounts I have sketched of the nature of preference are very different. On the first account, preferences are an ontological – in particular, a psychological or mental – free lunch; they supervene on or are determined by or are constituted by a person's emotions and sentiments and their features. On the second account, preferences are brought into being by preferring, understood as episodic impressions of betterness or importance. Are the two accounts really rival accounts? Why not think that there are preferences of both types? The existence of preferences which display intentionality and of preferences which do not seems to me to be incompatible with the idea that preference has an essence or nature. It also seems to me that the strongest part of the case for wholly intentional preferring is the part dealing with impressions of importance or value-height. For in such cases differences of degree between monadic value properties can play no role. But here too the friend of the view that preferences are

determined by attitudes and their features has an alternative account available. He may say that a preference for one value over another is determined by the relative *depths* of a person's attitudes and sentiments. Thus the preference of an anti-Nietzschean might be determined by a deep attachment to, or reverence for, the value of knowledge and indifference to, or a superficial aesthetic appreciation of, the value of health. But, as far as I can tell, the relation between value-height, value-conflict, preference and action is still much under-explored. Some aspects of this relation, nicely formulated by Bernard Williams, make it clear why the relation is still so little understood:

Very many of our [one-party, one-person value-] conflicts ... are at a level where interpretation in action is less determinate or immediate. Values such as liberty, equality, and expressions of justice other than equality, can certainly conflict as ideals or objectives, though their connection with immediately presented courses of action may often be problematical, while, in the other direction, a choice between presented courses of action may in some cases be only indeterminately guided or shaped by appeal to these values. - Still further from particular choices of action or policy are evaluations of admirable human characteristics or virtues such as courage, gentleness, honesty, independence of spirit and so forth (Williams, B. 1981 "Conflicts of Value", *Moral Luck*, 75-76)

Something like the account I have sketched of preferring as a wholly intentional phenomenon has, as far as I know, only ever been endorsed by one group of modern philosophers – by Brentano and some of his Austrian and German heirs. In his attempt to resurrect Aristotle's account of preference and to put it at the heart of the philosophy of mind and value – for another resurrection, see the very rich paper by our birthday boy, Sahlin, N-E. 1993 "Worthy of Choice", *Theoria*, LIX, 178-191) – Brentano employs the unusual concept of a preferring (*ein Vorziehen*) and describes preferring as "a relating liking or loving" (*ein beziehentliches Lieben*). Something like the view of preference as an internal relation between attitudes was sometimes called "analytic preferring" in the Brentano tradition,

and something like what I have called value preference was there called “synthetic preferring” (Hermann Schwarz).

One of the ironies in the history of the theory of preference is that it seems to have been Brentano’s Prague student, Oskar Kraus, who persuaded the early Austrian economists, in particular, Böhm-Bawerk, to introduce the concept of preference into their accounts of economic behaviour and marginal utility. But Kraus did not manage to persuade the economists to employ Brentano’s account of preference. It was therefore only a matter of time before preference came to be seen as something which is no mental state but is wholly determined either by attitudes and mental states or by behavioural dispositions.

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