Preferences
All I want is to sit on my arse and fart and think of Dante.

Samuel Beckett

Desires and wants, however intense, are not by themselves reasons in matters of justice. The fact that we have a compelling desire does not argue for the propriety of its satisfaction any more than the strength of a conviction argues for its truth.

John Rawls

Take any demand, however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make. Ought it not, for its own sole sake, to be satisfied? If not, prove why not. The only possible kind of proof you could adduce would be the exhibition of another creature who should make a demand that ran the other way. The only possible reason there can be why any phenomenon ought to exist is that such a phenomenon actually is desired.

William James
Preface

Preferences is a collection of essays on the concept and the role of preferences (desires, and the like) in practical reasoning. Ground covered includes welfare, prudence, rational decision making, and all areas of moral philosophy: ethics (applied and not so applied), metaethics, and deontic logic. A special symposium looks at possible preferences and their significance in matters of life and death, including the notoriously thorny question how many people there should be. All the essays are published here for the first time.

The book is not just for specialists. We have given it an introduction that, though it may move swiftly, at least starts from scratch; a selected bibliography is also provided.

Most of the authors were able to meet in advance, and to present, discuss, and then revise their contributions. But the line has to be drawn somewhere, and authors who receive a reply in this volume were not permitted to adjust their papers in the light of the final version of the reply. The initial exchange took place in Saarbrücken and Saarlouis in June 1992.

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Everybody has been very kind to us. Georg Meggle — selfless and cheerful as usual — co-designed the project and supported it from beginning to end. When we proposed the meeting, we were backed up by Franz von Kutschera and Wolfgang Lenzen. Barbara Schumacher helped prepare and run it.

The editors of Perspectives in Analytical Philosophy, Georg Meggle and Julian Nida-Rümelin, have welcomed the book in precisely the form we suggested. The authors have been co-operative and patient throughout. Christopher Abbey and Seán Matthews have given valuable advice, linguistic and otherwise, to many of us. Kornelius Bamberger was able, and kind enough, to convert most of the data that the contributors sent us. Thomas Fehige gave these data a neat, uniform lay-out. Patrick Agsten, Morika Claßen, Franziska Muschiol, Ulf Schwarz, and Valentin Wagner have assisted us, efficiently and in numerous respects; the same holds true of Karin Thom. With this list in chronological order, one important acknowledgement comes last: de Gruyter publishers. Working with Hans-Robert Cram was a pleasure; ditto, at the technical end, with Grit Müller.
Preface

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We thank all these persons and institutions for their support.

*

We share the belief, now regarded in some quarters as both unsound and old-fashioned, that, in essence, morality is all about welfare, and welfare all about preferences. Some of the contributors to this volume would agree, some would not. With luck, this collection will help advance matters a little.

Christoph Fehige and Ulla Wessels
Leipzig, January 1998
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Abstracts

These are abstracts of the papers that receive a reply, not of the replies themselves. The abstracts appear in the alphabetical order of the authors' names; for the contributions to the symposium on possible preferences, see the final abstract.

LENNART ÅQVIST

Prima Facie Obligations in Deontic Logic: A Chisholmian Analysis Based on Normative Preference Structures

The paper argues for an analysis of the W. D. Ross notion of prima facie obligation which results from adding a certain Chisholm-style definition to the system $G$ of Dyadic Deontic Logic, supplemented with so-called propositional quantifiers. In the semantics for that system a von-Kutschera-inspired conception of normative preference structures turns out to be of vital importance.


RICHARD B. BRANDT

The Rational Criticism of Preferences

Preferences are rationally criticized if vivid representation of confirmed beliefs will result in a reversal or strengthening. It is universally agreed that plans can be so criticized but not basic preferences for types of events. Define "preference" as "desiring more". Psychologists agree that desire for an event-type is increased if an event-type has been associated with pleasant events in the past – conditioning by contiguity. (The status of bodily needs – like thirst and hunger – is different; such needs are fixed by chemical imbalances in the body.) But many events are pleasant for evolutionary reasons; if they weren’t pleasant and hence the pleasant type of event wanted, the individuals would not survive. This connection – pleasant event, being wanted from classical conditioning, and hence preference – opens the way to rational criticism. For reflection on facts can alter preferences when the preference is seen to be a result (1) of inadequate representation of facts, or (2) of influence by temporary motivational states, or (3) of stimulus generalization from abnormal cases, or (4) of overlooking unpleasant facts about the object, or (5) of failure of making discriminations, or (6) as a result of suggestions by teachers, or (7) as a result of false or unjustified factual beliefs. The author suggests we
say a preference has been rationally criticized if reflection on these defects results in a modification of the preference.

Anna Kusser's comment, "Rational by Shock", begins on p. 78.

John Broome
Extended Preferences
(page 271)

Ordinalism is generally taken to imply that interpersonal comparisons of good are impossible. But some ordinalists have argued that these comparisons can be made in a way that is consistent with ordinalism, on the basis of extended preferences. This paper shows that this argument is mistaken, and ordinalism is indeed incompatible with interpersonal comparisons of good.


Sven Danielsson
Numerical Representations of Value-Orderings: Some Basic Problems
(page 114)

Measures of value or preference usually presuppose value or preference relations which are weak orders. Numerical representations of semiorders and of interval orders have to some extent also been considered. It is fairly obvious, however, that value- and preference-orderings often are not, and should not be expected to be, even interval orders. A way of representing partial orders is suggested.

Ulrich Nortmann's comment, "Interval Orders Defended", begins on p. 123.

Christoph Fehige and Ulla Wessels
Preferences – an Introduction
(page xx)

In theories of practical reasoning, we can encounter preferences (desires, and the like) in five places. Two of them are the form and the content of rationality; the other three are the form, the content, and the foundation of morality. This introduction presents the terrain and explains its overall structure; it also pays a brief visit to each of the locations and points out some of the disputes surrounding them. The doctrine of preferentialism and its problems will be a convenient leitmotiv, since it is widely held and employs preferences, and preferences only, on all the five levels. The tour is structured as follows. After a prologue that sketches preferentialism, we will consider the very
concept of a preference (section 1). We will then look at the possible roles of preferences in rationality (section 2), and at the triad of roles they might play in morality (section 3). Finally, there is a selected bibliography.

**Allan Gibbard**  
Preference and Preferability  
(page 239)

What does “good” mean? The paper starts with two vague truisms: That goodness is a matter of preferability, and that of two things, the preferable one is the one it is rational to prefer. In his book *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (1990), the author had proposed a theory of what “rational” means; this paper faces two questions: (1) What concept of preference, if any, fits the formula that the preferable of two things is the one it is rational to prefer? (2) How should this formula be filled out: Rational for whom to prefer, when? Classical decision theory treats preference as consisting in one’s disposition to choose. Such revealable preference will probably not serve as a good explanatory concept in a scientific psychology, it is suggested, but it may be much the concept that is needed for purposes of defining preferability. Roughly, the preferable of two things is the one it is rational to choose. This needs to be refined, though: Talk of what is preferable to what purports to be neutral among parties to the conversation. Indeed one use of the term “good”, prominent among philosophers, treats all humanity as our conversational group. If rational intrinsic preferences need not be impartial, then not all considerations that bear on rational choice need be matters of goodness so understood. Good-making considerations will be those considerations that bear on choices consequentially and neutrally, and goodness will be a matter of how these good-making considerations sum up.


**Rainer Hegselmann**  
Experimental Ethics:  
A Computer Simulation of Classes, Cliques, and Solidarity  
(page 298)

The article deals with two questions: (a) Can relations and networks of solidarity emerge in a world exclusively inhabited by rational egoists, who are unequal and choose their partners opportunistically? (b) If networks of solidarity do emerge in such a world, what do they look like? By means of computer simulations it is shown that networks of solidarity can emerge in such a world. But the networks will show quite distinct features of some class segregation.

It is argued that both deontological and consequentialist principles have their legitimate place in ethics, and that neither kind is reducible to the other. The problem, then, is how to integrate them into a unified system. A simple solution would be to have duties override value considerations, and the discussion centers on the merits and shortcomings of this proposal.

Wilfried Hinsch's comment, "Beyond Duty", begins on p. 172.

Theories of rational decision normally distinguish basic and other preferences, using only the former for calculating an agent's utility function. The idea behind the distinction is that, on the one hand, a theory of rational decision must allow criticism of at least a part of the agent's actual preferences; on the other hand, so as not to lose touch with the agent's real interests, it must rely on his factual preferences. Different decision theories have declared as basic various sets of preferences, thereby arriving at very different utility functions. Therefore, the question of which preferences shall be basic is of large practical importance. Nonetheless, it has rarely been discussed.

The article criticises some standard approaches, but mainly develops criteria for the selection of basic preferences. One of the principles for the selection of basic preferences, for example, is epistemic rationalisation. From these principles, then, 12 conditions of adequacy for the selection of the preferential basis are derived, e.g. taking over only intrinsic preferences, and of these not the single preferences but their underlying criteria.

Antonella Corradini's comment, "Intrinsic Desirabilities", begins on p. 57.

We do not, and cannot, normally come to have desires by simply deciding to have them. It is argued that this is not a contingent fact, and that the explanation for this fact shows a widely held view of practical reasoning to be false.

Sydney Shoemaker's comment, "Desiring at Will (and at Pill)", begins on p. 26.
Abstracts

Rainer Werner Trapp

The Potentialities and Limits of a Rational Justification of Ethical Norms, or: What Precisely is Minimal Morality?

(page 327)

Starting from the insight that, due to certain epistemological peculiarities of 'normative truth', normative statements cannot claim to be objectively (= O) true, the paper systematically works out the idea of basing the O-validity of general moral norms on their O-utility rather than on their O-truth. According to this idea any restriction of choice, in an n-person-conflict of interests S, qualifies as O-valid if it fulfills one of the two following criteria: Either compliance to it by at least a specifiable number k of the n individuals in S would make everybody already in each instance of S better off than norm-free anarchy (= criterion (I), which establishes two classes of unconditionally O-valid norms each avoiding a corresponding type of trap of prudence), or it would, under certain assumptions of the interacting individuals on the probabilities of the roles taken in their respective lifetime-sequences of situations of type S, increase everybody's utility payoff in the long run (= criterion (II), which establishes three classes of only conditionally O-valid norms). Thus even 'non-veiled' rational egoists refusing to initially concede any rationally unfoundable moral protonorm whatsoever, one that demands some (Harsanyian, Rawlsian, ...) impartial standpoint in considering an agreement on mutual restrictions of behaviour, will -- so it is argued -- have to contract on at least these norms in a fictitious original agreement. The latter's extension defines the system $M_{min}$ of minimal morality. Though being far more comprehensive than related approaches to 'morals by agreement' (notably Gauthier's), $M_{min}$ will finally be assessed as morally insufficient due to its not containing any compensatory norms. Since some of the latter, according to widespread convictions, are indispensable and since these, at the same time, are not justifiable as O-valid on the basis of whatever brand of veil-free contractarianism, any programme of founding a satisfactory moral system on mere collective rationality is considered as doomed to fail eventually.


J. David Velleman

Is Motivation Internal to Value?

(page 88)

The view that something's being good for a person depends on his capacity to care about it -- sometimes called internalism about a person's good -- is here derived from the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. In the course of this derivation, the limits of internalism are discussed, and a distinction is drawn between two senses of the phrase "a person's good".

Georg Meggle's comment, "Motivation and Value", begins on p. 103.
DAVID WIGGINS
In a Subjectivist Framework, Categorical Requirements and Real Practical Reasons
(page 212)

In this paper, the author tries to show that Hume, interpreted as a genealogist of morals – not as empiricist, prescriptivist, projectivist, expressivist or error theorist –, can do justice to the moral phenomena that moral philosophers discuss under the heading of the categorical imperative. His position on this matter is compared and contrasted with that of Kant. It is claimed that Hume discusses the real reasons, such as they are, why, regardless of inclination, we should heed the categorical requirements of morality.


MARCUS WILLASCHER
Agency, Autonomy, and Moral Obligation
(page 176)

The paper proposes and, in part, defends an understanding of human agency, autonomy, and moral obligation as integral parts of our concept of a person. Specifically, the first part (sects. 1–12) argues for a causal theory of action in which the acting person plays a central role in the causal history of her actions. The person exercises her causal influence according to normative principles of rationality. That presupposes some independence from her own motivation including the ability to acknowledge or reject parts of it as a basis of her rational decisions. This ability is constitutive of the autonomy of the person. The second part (sects. 13–29) presents an argument to the effect that the concept of autonomy presupposes a general universalist principle of morality. Autonomy involves a distinction between motives that are ‘authentic’ and motives that are not. This distinction does not rest on a substantive idea of what autonomous action is, but rather on a formal or procedural notion. Nevertheless, it presupposes a normative standard which is different from and largely independent of the motives a person in fact has. This standard can be found in the ideas of impartial benevolence and universal rational consent which inform universalist conceptions of morality.

HILARY BOK’S comment, “Autonomy and Morality”, begins on p. 204.

CHRISTOPH FEHIGE, RICHARD M. HARE, WOLFGANG LENZEN, JEFF McMahan, PETER SINGER, THOMAS SPITZLEY, AND ULLA WESSELS
Symposium on Possible Preferences
(page 367)

Sometimes our actions make a difference not just to the frustration or satisfaction of preferences that exist (have existed, or will exist), but to the very question which preferences will exist; so they require us to look not only at actual, but also at possible pref-
periences. These actions, their morality and their rationality, are the topic of the present symposium.

Most choices concerning a preferrer's life or death are dramatic and obvious examples of such actions (no life, no preference), and they have come to dominate the discussion of possible preferences, and this symposium as well. Thus, on the more applied level, this is a symposium about the morality of conception and contraception, abortion, population policy and killing, about the value of life and the badness of death.

For a guide to this web of issues, see the "Introduction to Possible Preferences" at the beginning of the symposium (p. 367); more information on the various contributions, and on how they relate to each other, is given in the last section (pp. 379–81) of that introduction.
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Georg Meggle was born in 1944 and studied philosophy in Munich, Oxford, and Regensburg. He received his Dr. phil. in 1979, habilitated in 1984, and has been Professor of Philosophy at the universities in Münster (1985–89), Saarbrücken (1989–94), and Leipzig (since 1994). He is the founder, and was the first president, of the Gesellschaft für Analytische Philosophie (GAP). His main fields of work are the philosophy of action and of language, and ethics. Meggle's best known book is *Grundbegriffe der Kommunikation* (second ed., Berlin 1996), and he is editor of the series *Perspectives in Analytical Philosophy*. 
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