

Preferences

encyclopedia of social theory

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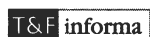
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PREFERENCES

Preferring one state of affairs to another amounts to desiring it more strongly or favouring it. Philosophers of mind debate how to characterize such attitudes. Some hold that by a preference we mean a possible cause of action; on this view, a person's preference (say, for health over illness) should be defined as the attitude that would cause her to do certain things (say, to exercise) in certain circumstances. It has also been suggested that a preference is merely a disposition to act: a person's tendency to perform certain actions under certain conditions. Or that it is a disposition to feel – for instance, a person's tendency to feel better imagining one scenario rather than another, or to feel better receiving the news that one rather than the other has come true. Two further views are that the concept of a preference is respectable but unanalyzable; or that it is hopeless and should be boycotted.

Preferences pervade social theory because they pervade both the **explanation** and the evaluation of **action**. Consider again a person's preference for health. This preference might help us explain her exercising, but it might also confer various kinds of normative status on this and other actions. For one thing, it might make exercising the prudent, reasonable course of action for that person, thus building a bridge from explaining to understanding or rationalizing

her behaviour. Preferences loom large, therefore, in the quest for *Verstehen* that informs **hermeneutics** and in **rational choice** theory as conceived by **game theory** and methodological **individualism**. Then there is the moral part of the normative. A person's preference for health might be the feature of the world that would make it good and right for others to promote her health, and wrong for them to interfere with her health. Her preferences might be the source of other people's obligations to her. Such proposals to centre **morality** and all **values and norms** around preference satisfaction are typically rooted in **utilitarianism**. The moral good is seen as an aggregate of all the individuals' good, and an individual's good as the satisfaction of her preferences or desires.

However, putting preferences centre-stage has its problems. Preference-based explanations of behaviour threaten to become vacuous if the very concept of a preference is behavioural – for how could my tendency to do something explain my doing it? If we steer clear of this vacuity by employing a less behavioural concept of preference, large portions of real-life behaviour may fail to match preferences and, *a fortiori*, to be explained by them. Another challenge comes from the hard sciences, for they aspire to provide physical explanations of everything, human action included. Can talk of attitudes like preferences be made to fit in with talk of atoms or neurons? The normative domain, too, is controversial. In assessing actions as rational or right, it has been objected, we should not give a say simply to *any* preference – not, for example, to preferences that are sadistic or caused by brain-washing or by false information. If this objection holds, and if thus preferences themselves have to meet normative constraints in order for an individual action or social policy prompted by them to qualify as wise or good, the reduction of reason and value to subjective preference is incoherent.

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