

# WHY PREFERENCE-SATISFACTION CANNOT GROUND A NORMATIVE MORAL OR POLITICAL THEORY

Walter E. Schaller  
Texas Tech University

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## INTRODUCTION:

Philosophers now commonly distinguish between teleological (or consequentialist) theories and deontological theories by saying that in the former the good precedes, or has priority over, the right.<sup>1</sup> It follows that if the good is prior to the right, it must be possible to specify the good independently of the right. If, however, the good is dependent upon a prior determination of the right, then a vicious circle arises. I shall call this the problem of circularity.

I shall argue that grounding a moral or political theory on preference-satisfaction generates a vicious circle. I shall illustrate my argument by reference to (i) preference utilitarianism and (ii) Richard Arneson's principle of Equal Opportunity for Welfare (EOW), at least insofar as it incorporates what Arneson calls "distributive subjectivism."<sup>2</sup>

The gist of my argument is as follows. Take preference (act) utilitarianism, according to which right actions are those that maximize (expected) preference-satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> It must therefore be possible (in principle) to identify each person's preferences prior to a determination of which action maximizes overall preference-satisfaction. A vicious circle is generated, however, if, as I shall argue, some preferences are inescapably dependent on prior moral beliefs, for then it will not be possible to determine which actions maximize preference-satisfaction without presupposing at least some moral beliefs.

The same problem affects Arneson's principle of equal opportunity for welfare (EOW) as a principle of distributive justice. Stated in terms of preference-satisfaction, EOW requires that individuals have equal opportunity to satisfy their (nonvoluntary, self-interested) preferences and that any inequalities in the extent to which people have satisfied their preferences should be the result of their voluntary choices.<sup>4</sup> But if their preferences are to some extent dependent upon their prior beliefs about equality and

distributive justice, then the circularity problem arises for Arneson's theory as well.

## **SECTION I: THE NATURE OF PREFERENCES**

A preference-satisfaction theory of the good is most plausible if preferences are conceived on the model of tastes and appetites--what James Griffin calls the Taste Model.<sup>5</sup> If preferences are physiological or psychological facts which exist prior to and independent of an individual's beliefs (and expectations, the importance of which I shall discuss below), then it might appear possible (*ceteris paribus*) to determine which actions (or rules) would either maximize the satisfaction of people's preferences or satisfy the requirement of EOW--with no danger of a vicious circle.

Before criticizing the Taste Model, I should point out that even tastes are not necessarily independent of moral beliefs. Consider a vegetarian--call him Vinny--who believes that eating meat is wrong and who, consequently, does not enjoy the taste of meat. In this case, Vinny's tastes concerning meat are not independent of his moral beliefs. It might be thought, however, that the vicious circle can be avoided in the following way. The fact that Vinny does not have an all-things-considered preference for eating meat (compared to not eating meat) does not preclude the possibility that Vinny does have a desire or taste for meat but it is outweighed by his desire not to act immorally (by eating meat). His actual 'taste' for meat has not been affected by his moral beliefs.

But this objection has limited force. Even if it describes some vegetarians, it does not necessarily describe all of them. It is certainly possible that Vinny's moral belief caused him to lose all of his earlier desire or taste for meat such that he no longer gets pleasure from eating meat. (In the same way I would think that many Americans have no taste for or desire to eat the meat of a dog or cat, or to eat earthworms or cockroaches, or other human beings, and that they would not enjoy doing so if they knew what they were eating, although they might very well enjoy it if they falsely believed they were eating, say, chicken.)

Therefore, even if many tastes are independent of prior moral beliefs, it is possible that some tastes are affected by moral beliefs. And so, even on the Taste Model of preferences, a vicious circle can

arise.

But there are compelling reasons not to regard all preferences on the model of tastes (or appetites). For one thing, if preference-satisfaction is the measure of a person's welfare, then it seems obvious that many preferences (or tastes) are such that their satisfaction cannot plausibly be said to increase the person's welfare. Preference utilitarians therefore frequently distinguish between actual preferences and ideal preferences and argue that welfare must be defined in terms only of the latter.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I shall ignore the problems raised by uninformed or irrational preferences.

If preferences are not tastes, what are they? Let us consider Arneson's definition. Arneson defines (self-interested) preferences as personal value judgments--"the criterion of preference is sincere judgment of what is best for oneself." Although preferences typically involve three things--"choice behavior, felt desire, and verbal judgments"--it is the latter that has priority if there is conflict among the three factors. One's preferences may therefore conflict with one's felt desires. <sup>7</sup>

Attractive as Arneson's proposal is, understanding preferences as consisting, fundamentally, of value judgments does nothing to solve the circularity problem. For one thing, one of the differences between tastes, feelings and appetites, on the one hand, and preferences (as value judgments), on the other hand, is that the latter are responsive to beliefs and to reason in a way (and to an extent) that the former (tastes and appetites) typically are not (although see the Vegetarian Case above). Sally, for example, may dislike spinach while at the same time having a preference for spinach, having judged that it is prudentially valuable. Conversely, Sally may judge that smoking is imprudent and therefore have no preference for smoking cigarettes yet still have a craving for cigarettes (and enjoy their taste). The fact that our beliefs and judgments are more responsive to reason than our feelings and desires are is one reason why there can be a conflict between the two. It is also why preferences (as value judgments) are more vulnerable to the problem of circularity.

By understanding preferences as value judgments, Arneson avoids a common (Kantian) objection to subjectivist theories of the good, namely, that "Desires do not give reasons for action."<sup>8</sup> But the

circularity problem remains. If people's self-interested preferences--i.e., their prudential value judgments--are sometimes dependent on and shaped by their antecedent moral beliefs, then preferences cannot provide a neutral, non-question-begging foundation for moral principles. 9

## **SECTION II: PERSONAL PREFERENCES VS. EXTERNAL PREFERENCES**

In addition to distinguishing between actual preferences and ideal preferences, it is common to find preference utilitarians arguing that external and moral preferences should not enter into the social-welfare function, that utilitarianism requires the maximal satisfaction only of personal (i.e., self-interested) preferences.<sup>10</sup> We should simply exclude desires that arise from moral preferences.

Ronald Dworkin has pointed out one difficulty with this suggestion: personal preferences can be founded on external preferences.<sup>11</sup> Dworkin's example is of a racist whose personal preference (to associate only with other white law students) is grounded in racist external preferences. We should be skeptical, therefore, about the possibility of distinguishing personal preferences from external preferences in a way that would avoid the circularity problem.

But the dependence of personal preferences upon moral beliefs and moral preferences gives rise to an additional problem (not discussed by Dworkin), a problem which leads to a kind of inequity in the making of interpersonal comparisons of welfare (as preference-satisfaction). Suppose Oscar believes that greed is a vice and, as a consequence, Oscar's self-interested preferences develop such that he has no greedy preferences. Bud, on the other hand, enjoyed an upbringing in which greediness was seldom an issue; as a result, Bud is greedy and Oscar is not. Oscar's self-interested preferences are fewer, more modest (less expensive), and far less selfish than are Bud's.

Now suppose that Oscar and Bud are able to satisfy all of their preferences; should we conclude that their welfare levels are the same, that they are equally well-off? Should we accept the idea that what resources Oscar and Bud are entitled to (according to either PU or EOW) is determined by the relative scope and intensity of their respective preferences, such that the more preferences one has, or the more expensive they are, the more resources one is entitled to? I think not; to do so would be inequitable

because Bud's preferences do not stand on an equal moral footing with Oscar's. It would, in effect, penalize people like Oscar whose self-interested preferences already reflect and were shaped by (indeed, constrained by) antecedent moral beliefs (perhaps beliefs inconsistent with PU!) and it would reward people like Bud, whose self-interested preferences reflect no such prior moral constraints. Oscar would be disadvantaged for already being moral, i.e., for having already accepted stricter constraints on self-interest, on simply doing what he wants, than Bud has. Bud would be rewarded for being greedy: he gets more because he wants more.

But is this really an objection? If Oscar and Bud can satisfy all of their preferences, is Bud really better off than Oscar? Does it matter that Bud has more (or more expensive) self-interested preferences? Perhaps not. Consider the zero-one rule, according to which an individual's welfare is ranked on a scale from 0 to 1. If none of her preferences is satisfied, her welfare is 0; if all of them are, it is 1.<sup>12</sup> According to the zero-one rule, if Oscar and Bud are able to satisfy all of their preferences (or an equal percentage of them, weighted for intensity), they are equally well off. They have the same level of welfare despite the fact that Bud has more satisfied preferences.

The critical question, then, is whether we should accept the zero-one rule. Daniel Hausman argues that that rule cannot be rejected without rejecting preference-satisfaction altogether.<sup>13</sup> If Hausman is right, we cannot deny that Oscar and Bud have the same level of welfare without rejecting a preference-satisfaction account of welfare. But if preference-satisfaction, as a theory of the good, is modified so as to take account of common objections,<sup>14</sup> then the zero-one rule must be abandoned. Specifically, once we allow mental-state or experiential considerations to affect judgments of welfare, then it becomes possible that Oscar is better off than Bud because Oscar, though he has fewer satisfied preferences than Bud, derives greater satisfaction or enjoyment or pleasure from the satisfaction of his preferences.<sup>51</sup>

Notice, briefly, that this modification of preference-satisfaction does not solve the circularity problem. Just as antecedent moral beliefs may affect a person's tastes (recall Vinnie the Veggie), so too they may affect what a person finds satisfaction or pleasure in.

### SECTION III: THE PROBLEM OF ADAPTIVE PREFERENCES (THE SOUR GRAPES

#### PROBLEM)

It is widely acknowledged that preferences are, to a greater or lesser extent, affected by expectations. The higher or greater one's expectations, the more ambitious (and perhaps expensive) one's preferences will tend to be. And expectations are context-dependent: they are affected by, inter alia, one's beliefs about what is possible or feasible (which are affected by what is possible or feasible). The less one believes is possible, the lower one's expectations will tend to be. A person who believes that it is not possible to attend college (for financial reasons, for example) is less likely to want a college education or to value it very highly (compared to a person who has always expected (and been expected) to attend college and has the money to pay for it.

The problem, therefore, is to specify a context for the formation of expectations and preferences, for they do not arise in a (social) vacuum. (We are not trying to figure out what people would prefer if they have been raised by wolves, or had never lived in any human society.) One possible context is the status quo. What preference utilitarianism requires, then, is the maximal satisfaction of people's actual preferences (corrected for irrationality). But there are (at least) two reasons to reject the status quo as the appropriate context for the formation of preferences and expectations.

First, the status quo is not morally neutral. Like an individual's preferences, it too is the product--however inchoately--of beliefs about justice, equality, desert, fairness, responsibility, etc., as well as of many arbitrary (and random) factors. The problem of circularity arises at the social as well as at the individual level.

Second, the status quo may be more or less unjust and this generates the sour grapes problem. People's preferences may adapt to their circumstances so that their preferences and expectations reflect an antecedent inequality. To quote from Amartya Sen (in his "Dewey Lectures"):

Our reading of what is feasible in our situation and station may even affect what we dare to desire. Desires reflect compromises with reality, and reality is harsher to some than to others. The

hopeless destitute desiring merely to survive, the landless laborer concentrating his efforts on securing the next meal, the round-the-clock domestic servant seeking a few hours of respite, the subjugated housewife struggling for a little individuality, may all have learned to keep their desires in line with their respective predicament. Their deprivations are gagged and muffled in the interpersonal metric of desire fulfillment. In some lives small mercies have to count big. <sup>6</sup>

In other words, inequality itself may lead some people to have extravagant expectations (requiring relatively greater quantities of resources for their satisfaction) whereas others have desperately low personal expectations, because they (truly) believe that little is possible.

It is hard to see how egalitarians could be indifferent to the fact that many people's preferences were formed in the context of great inequality.

The phenomenon of adaptive preferences and the sour grapes problem therefore provide a second reason why actual preferences cannot ground a teleological moral or political principle. To seek maximal satisfaction of actual preferences would be to ratify, and even to strengthen, any antecedent inequalities. Again, those who want more would be rewarded with more. And in fact Arneson does reject reliance upon the status quo. <sup>7</sup>

One may also have doubts about the possibility of a morally neutral account of 'healthy' preference-formation. It is not obviously irrational for people with poor life-prospects to have inexpensive preferences, tailored to their realistically low expectations. On what grounds can the formation of their preferences be criticized? What seems to be unacceptable, rather, is the reality that gives them poor life-prospects.).

The most obvious alternative to the status quo is an ideal or moral baseline. We should ask what preferences people would have in light of what they have a right to expect, or what they may reasonably or legitimately expect. But the circularity of a moral baseline should be obvious. Consider an example which illustrates the problem for a principle of distributive justice.

Suppose I am a car buff who has a preference for buying a new car each fall. (In Arneson's terms, a new car each fall is something I value prudentially, one of my self-interested preferences.) The strength of that preference, however, is not constant; it is a function of its relation to my other preferences. If I realize that buying a new car every fall will make it impossible for me to take a European vacation annually, and if I want a European vacation very much, then my desire for a new car may be rather weak.<sup>18</sup> The strength (and even the existence) of that preference is affected by its cost, by the cost to my other preferences of satisfying it.<sup>19</sup>

One important factor, therefore, in determining the strength of my preferences, will be the question of who will bear the cost of satisfying them. My preference for a European vacation is likely to be less intense if I am responsible for bearing its full cost than if those costs are (partially) absorbed by other people (e.g., if airline travel is subsidized, or if my dean can uncover a large travel grant taken out of graduate student tuition). In short, how much I prefer (or value) a European vacation (or a new car) is dependent upon my expectations about its cost to me.

Since the status quo has been rejected as the appropriate context for preference-formation, we cannot fall back upon my actual expectations about who will bear the expense of satisfying my preferences. Instead, we must appeal to a moral baseline: who should pay, or be responsible for, that cost? To answer that question we need a theory of distributive justice. But it is surely unacceptable for a theory of distributive justice to make a person's fair shares directly depend upon her antecedent beliefs about her fair shares (and what a fair distribution would be). The more inegalitarian are people's antecedent beliefs about distributive justice, the more inegalitarian the resulting fair distribution will be, even according to an egalitarian principle like EOW.<sup>20</sup> (The more I believe that students, through their tuition, should pay my travel costs, the more likely I am to have expensive travel preferences, and thus to have a greater claim for the resources necessary to satisfy those preferences--greater than if I did not have those beliefs and expectations and thus did not have those preferences.)<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that preference-satisfaction cannot be the good which is to be, e.g., maximized (according to preference utilitarianism). Preferences presuppose some determinate context for their formation; they do not arise in a social vacuum. If the status quo is the context, then familiar problems arise--the problem of sour grapes and adaptive preferences. If a normative context is adopted, then the problem of circularity returns with a vengeance. I conclude that the context-dependent character of preferences--the fact that they presuppose more or less determinate expectations and beliefs about what is possible and/or (morally) permissible--renders them unsuitable for the task set out by teleological moral and political theories, namely, to provide an independent conception of the good--the telos--which is to be promoted.

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#### **FOOTNOTES**

1. For a critical discussion of this way of distinguishing deontological and teleological theories, see Will Kymlicka, "Rawls on Teleology and Deontology," *PHILOSOPHY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS* 17 (1988), pp. 173-190.

2. Richard Arneson, "Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *PHILOSOPHY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS* 19 (1990), pp. 158-194. Arneson states: "the correct account of nonmoral value is one according to which the good for a person is the fulfillment of his (corrected) tastes and values" (159); "distributive subjectivism is the view that for purposes of a theory of distributive justice the proper measure of a person's goods or resources is the welfare level that these resources enable him to reach" (186).

3. For the purposes of my argument, it is possible to ignore many of the distinctions between, e.g., actual and expected consequences, total and average welfare, act and rule utilitarianism.

4. Thus Arneson argues: "a just society should not assume responsibility for correcting any distributive outcome that could have been avoided by reasonable voluntary choice on the part of the individual who is disadvantaged by that outcome, so long as the individual was capable of making such a voluntary choice and standing fast by it" ("Primary Goods Reconsidered," *NOUS* 24 [1990], p. 442).

See also "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES* 56 (1989): "We may say that in an extended sense people share equal opportunity for welfare just in case there is some time at which their opportunities are equal and if any inequalities in their opportunities at later times are due to their voluntary choice or differentially negligible behavior for which they are rightly deemed personally responsible" (83).

Although Arneson limits an individual's welfare to the satisfaction of nonvoluntary, self-interested preferences, for convenience I shall, for the most part, ignore that distinction. The

reader may normally assume that I am always referring (at least) to nonvoluntary preferences.

5. James Griffin, "Against the Taste Model," in *INTERPERSONAL COMPARISONS OF WELL-BEING*, eds. Jon Elster and John E. Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 45-69.

6. John Harsanyi argues that "we may distinguish between a person's explicit preferences, i.e., his preferences as they actually are, possibly distorted by factual and logical errors, and his 'true' preferences, i.e., his preferences as they would be under 'ideal conditions' and, in particular, after careful reflection and in possession of all the relevant information" ("Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior," in *UTILITARIANISM AND BEYOND*, eds. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], p. 55).

Arneson, though not straightforwardly a utilitarian, argues that "the preferences that serve as the measure of an individual's welfare are hypothetical ideally considered preferences--those the individual would have if he were to engage in ideally extended deliberation about his preferences with full pertinent information, in a calm mood, while thinking clearly and making no reasoning errors" ("Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," p. 163. See also "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," p. 83).

The classic discussion of whether preferences are ever irrational is found in David Hume, *TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE*, Book II, Part III, Section III.

For a different view on immoral preferences, see R.M. Hare, *MORAL THINKING* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), Chapter 8. For skepticism about the necessity of distinguishing between informed and uninformed preferences, see L.W. Sumner, "Welfare, Preference, and Rationality," in *VALUE, WELFARE, AND MORALITY*, eds. R.G. Frey and Christopher Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 81-82.

7. "Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," p. 162. Arneson writes: "The ascetic mounted on his pillar may experience strong waves of desire to dismount yet attach no value to dismounting. If he dismounts yet shows clear signs of regret or sadness at his own behavior, we may credit his claim that he really prefers staying on his post to abandoning it" (162). Also, "I take it to be obvious that, all things considered, a person may prefer to do what he believes to be morally required or what is nonmorally best from an impersonal standpoint while being perfectly aware that this course is not in his own best interest" (161-162).

John Broome understands preferences in a similar way--what he calls an evaluative concept of preferences: "a person prefers A to B (where this preference is nonpractical) if and only if A has, according to her probabilities, a greater expectation of good" ("Can a Humean be Moderate?," in *VALUE, WELFARE, AND MORALITY*, eds. R.G. Frey and Christopher W. Morris [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], p. 67).

8. Barbara Herman, "Agency, Attachment, and Difference," *ETHICS* 101 [1991], p. 785. Scanlon makes a similar argument: "Individuals do not, on the whole, take the fact that they have a certain preference to be a ground-level reason for doing or choosing one thing or another. More commonly, people prefer one outcome or course of action for a reason, and this reason, which is the ground of preference, is also the ground of choice. . . . Preferences are typically supported by reasons. . . . From an individual point of view, then, things are normally not valued because they

are preferred but, rather, preferred because they are judged desirable for some other reason" ("The Moral Basis of Interpersonal Comparisons," in INTERPERSONAL COMPARISONS OF UTILITY, pp. 25-26.

Herman offers an alternative to (what she calls) the Plural Interest model of deliberation, according to which deliberation consists simply in the weighing and balancing of competing interests (including moral versus prudential interests). In its stead, Herman proposes what she calls the Deliberative Field model, according to which deliberation is not merely means-end calculation or resolving conflict between ends (786). Rather, "[t]he alternative, or Kantian, model suggests that we think of an agent's deliberative field as containing representations of her interests, projects, and commitments that have been 'normalized' to varying degrees to the principles of practical agency, both moral and nonmoral. Kantian deliberation requires the prior processing of the material it takes up. . . . The normalization of the material of interest and desire to the principles of practical agency minimizes the degree to which deliberation and choice must involve sorting and weighing things of incommensurable or conflicting value" (789).

Central to Herman's discussion of the Deliberative Field model is her distinction between natural motives (which are as effective as they are strong) and normalized motives which are "effective as a function of [their] place in the deliberative field" (790). "Maxims and ends we know to be impermissible, if attractive, are represented as such; tasks we would take up as means toward desired goals are not represented as independently valuable (unless they also are); and so on" (788). Herman cautions that she is not saying that normalization eliminates all conflicts between natural motives and moral requirements (791). For my purposes, the important point is that it is a mistake to think that preferences are always independent of moral beliefs; some are but many are not. To the extent that people's preferences are normalized to their moral beliefs, the circularity problem exists.

9. In "Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," Arneson admits that "prior moral training may causally affect what an individual now wants, setting morality aside" (162n7), but he does not consider the possibility that such prior moral training may generate a vicious circle for preference-satisfaction theories of the good.

10.

Arneson, for example, restricts the concept of welfare to the satisfaction only of self-interested preferences.

In defending what he calls "weighted utilitarianism," Paul Weirich, for example, argues that in order to avoid the circularity problem (which he recognizes as a problem), desires that arise from moral preferences must be ignored. "[P]eople sometimes have desires for distributions of high moral value. Since utilities are to be used to help determine the moral values of distributions, a vicious circle might develop if through these desires the moral values of distributions help to determine utilities. More specifically, it might turn out that the moral values of distributions are pivotal for a group's desires on balance concerning those distributions and that the group's desires are pivotal for the moral values of the distribution so that (1) the moral values of the distributions are fixed only if the group has formed utilities for the distributions and (2) the group can form utilities for the distributions only if the moral values of the distributions are fixed. To avoid the possibility of such an impasse, I will stipulate that utilities exclude desires that arise from a concern for the moral value of distributions. Given this stipulation, utilities may exclude desires for the welfare of strangers. However, utilities will not exclude all

altruistic desires since . . . a person usually desires the welfare of his children independently of a desire for the moral value of distribution. Summing up, the utility of a distribution for an individual is his degree of desire on balance, distributive morality aside, for the course of events that would follow if the distribution were carried out" ("Utility Tempered with Equality," *NOUS* 17 [1983], p. 426).

11. *TAKING RIGHTS SERIOUSLY* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 235-237.

12. For a brief discussion of this rule, see John Rawls, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 323.

13. Daniel Hausman, "The Impossibility of Interpersonal Utility Comparisons," *MIND* 104 (1995), pp. 482, 484.

14. See, for example, D.W. Haslett: "Preferences that concern personal welfare are ones the satisfaction, or frustration, of which will, or probably will, affect the subject's experiences; all others do not concern personal welfare" ("What is Utility?" *ECONOMICS AND PHILOSOPHY* 6 [1990], p. 82); L.W. Sumner, "Two Theories of the Good," *SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY AND POLICY* 9 (1992), 1-14; James Griffin, *WELL-BEING*, Ch. 1, and "Modern Utilitarianisms," *REVUE INTERNATIONALE DE PHILOSOPHIE* (1982), sec. 4.

15. Hausman himself rejects the zero-one rule for ordinal utility rankings on moral grounds: it is unfair that a greedy person's preferences be treated on a par with the preferences of undemanding persons ("The Impossibility of Interpersonal Utility Comparisons," pp. 473-490, especially Section 5).

See also Peter Hammond, "Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility: Why and How They Are and Should Be Made," in *INTERPERSONAL COMPARISONS OF UTILITY*, eds. Jon Elster and John Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 216.

16. "Well-Being, Agency, and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," *JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY* 82 (1985), p. 191.

17. Arneson specifically addresses the sour grapes problem--the fact that a "person's preferences shrink and expand with contractions and expansions of her opportunities" ("Liberalism, Distributive Justice, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," p. 169). "Desperate life circumstances can reduce an individual's aspirations, and a high degree of satisfaction of reduced preferences may be an unreliable indication of living well, so a principle of distributive justice that is responsive only to levels of preference satisfaction may in fact be blind to matters that should be highly germane to findings of justice or injustice" (168).

Arneson's response is to appeal to the idea of 'hypothetical ideally considered preferences' or, more simply, 'hypothetical rational preferences.' Thus, "If the person were to deliberate with full information, she would decide whether she values more highly the satisfaction of the desires formed by the availability of a smaller set or of a larger opportunity set. No appeal beyond the person's own preferences (as they would be if corrected by full information and clear deliberation) is needed to give a satisfactory account of welfare in the face of the sour grapes phenomenon" (169).

Arneson also appeals to "a standard of healthy preference formation that is neutral in the sense that it is not rigged by any prior judgment about what sorts of preferences this process ought to produce" (170). The problem with this suggestion is that the preferences it would be rational for a person to have are so numerous that it seems impossible to specify, in the abstract (i.e., without reference to the person's actual personal history) what particular preferences she would have. It is not hard to see that some preferences (e.g., to smoke) are inconsistent with other preferences (e.g., to live a long and healthy life) or that some preferences (e.g., to live a long and healthy life) imply that certain other preferences are rational (e.g., to eat lots of fruits, vegetable, and yogurt). But these limited cases do not answer the hard question: how much would it be rational for the destitute and the subjugated to 'dare to desire?' If the status quo is rejected as the context for their expectation- and preference-formation, then a different context must be selected; if it is a moral baseline, then the problem of circularity has not been avoided.

18. Of course, I may still long for, or wish for, a new car annually, so the question of subjective intensity is only partially dependent upon the cost of satisfying it, and how dependent it is may vary from person to person. But, again, if preferences are, at bottom, value-judgments, then I may still have a felt desire for a new car but attach no value to the satisfaction of that desire.

19. Arneson curiously dismisses the problem of cost. He writes: "The egalitarian doctrine of philosophical liberals such as Rawls and Dworkin begins with the assumption that each individual possesses an equal dignity and worth and that in virtue of this equality society . . . ought to guarantee a reasonable opportunity for a good life for every individual. What counts as a 'reasonable opportunity for a good life' depends on (a) the right characterization of a 'good life,' (b) the extent of the burdens it is fair to impose on some persons to augment the opportunities of other persons whose prospects would otherwise be poor, and (c) the standard of personal conduct it is reasonable to expect of someone with a view toward ensuring that by conducting herself at that standard the individual can gain a quality of life above some threshold of desirability. In this essay I am assuming that satisfactory analyses on points a and b have been agreed upon" ("Justice and Responsibility," [1995], unpublished).

I am arguing that a satisfactory answer to (b) is still quite up in the air because there are serious problems with making some people responsible for satisfying the preferences of others. I am also disputing Arneson's answer regarding (a), at least with regard to its implications for distributive justice.

20. Arneson might respond that EOW pertains only to nonvoluntary preferences. If a person voluntarily acquires an expensive preference because she believes that distributive justice requires other people to bear the cost of its satisfaction, then she is responsible for the cost of satisfying it. But it is not obvious that preferences which are dependent upon a person's moral beliefs and (reasonable) expectations are always voluntary preferences. For one thing, expectations may change in response to changes in reality. People who win the lottery or inherit a lot of money may suddenly become quite greedy and acquire intense preferences for many new things, without ever having decided to acquire those new preferences. They may even regret that they now have these new (greedy) preferences. But the fact that their expectations have unexpectedly changed is what accounts for the changes in their preferences. What had been unaffordable, and therefore unreasonable to expect and to prefer, is now affordable.

In any case, the fact that Arneson takes seriously the problem of sour grapes indicates that he is not willing simply to say (i) that such persons voluntarily restrain their preferences (to keep them in line with their diminished expectations) and therefore (ii) that they are responsible for the resulting inequalities.

Nor does Arneson's appeal to a process of "healthy preference formation" ("Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," p. 170; see note 17 above) solve the problem of circularity. For even healthy preferences must develop within a moral and political context and in light of a set of expectations about what one may plausibly acquire or accomplish. Even granting that the destitute and the subjugated would have more expensive preferences if they had not endured a distorted or unhealthy process of preference formation, their new preferences would have to be, to some extent, a response to their changed beliefs and expectations. How much they would "dare to desire" would depend upon the extent to which their expectations--and their beliefs about what they can reasonably expect--have changed. If the status quo is rejected as the baseline, then a different baseline--an ideal or moral baseline--must be selected and the problem of circularity returns.

Finally, if it is possible to extinguish or eradicate a preference, then that preference is, according to Arneson, a voluntary preference for which the holder is properly held responsible. But since the problem of adaptive preferences is that the individual lacks certain preferences, it is a moot question whether that individual could deliberately eradicate certain preferences.

21. This argument mirrors the objection to treating Oscar's and Bud's preferences on an equal moral footing. For the objection was that the greedier Bud was, the more expensive his preferences would be, and the more he would be entitled to under any preference-based moral theory.