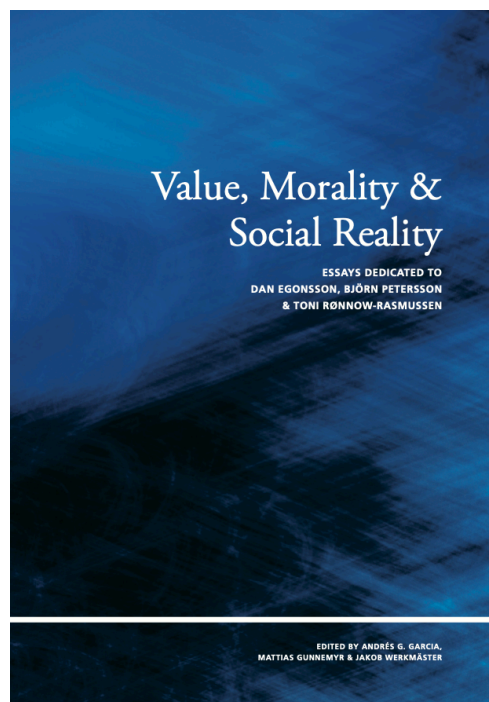


# Preference, Information, and the Problem of Big Decisions

*Johan Brännmark*

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# Preference, Information, and the Problem of Big Decisions

Johan Brännmark

**Abstract.** Many of the examples considered by philosophers when discussing preferences concern choices between relatively specific and simple objects, *e.g.*, me having a preference for an apple over an orange at  $t_1$ . Such preferences seem to have a straightforward relation to what it is rational for me to choose, and possibly also to what would be good for me. Some authors, like Dan Egonsson and Edna Ullmann-Margalit, have however worried about whether our standard way of thinking about preferences and rational choice will work when applied to bigger life decisions. In this paper, it will be argued that there really are deep problems with the idea of there being *best* options for how to lead one's life, but also that this should not be taken as grounds for thinking that there is something wrong with the idea that preferences matter. Instead, that there sometimes is no *best* option to choose is just a characteristic of what it is like to lead a human life.

Preferences matter. At least some of them. Depending on whether we are subjectivists or objectivists about the good or human well-being, we might differ on how much and in which ways they matter, but whenever a person has a clear-cut and reasonably well thought-through preference, it is something that we would typically take seriously when thinking about what we might do to benefit that person. Even many (perhaps even most) would-be paternalists will justify going against our current inclinations by saying that one is giving people what they *would* prefer or choose themselves if “they had complete information, unlimited cognitive abilities, and no lack of self-control” (Thaler & Sunstein, 2003: 1162).

Not all who emphasize the notion of *preference* go as far as Thaler & Sunstein, but most if not all place some kind of *information requirement* on the preferences that count (Egonsson, 2007). For the subjectivist, there is a delicate balance to be struck here: on the one hand, avoiding that misguided preferences count, on the other hand avoiding that the requirements are pushed up to superhuman levels, since we might then end up with *my* good being determined by the preferences of an ideal being that is alien to the person I actually am (*cf.* Rosati, 1995: 311). While striking this kind of balance is a perennial problem for subjectivists, the focus in this paper will be on a more specific problem (although it has some bearing on more general matters as well).

The decisions we make differ wildly in terms of where on the scale of complexity that the objects of choice under consideration are located. Sometimes we make small decisions, like whether one is going to eat an apple or an orange at a certain point in time, sometimes much bigger ones, like whether one is going to become a parent, which career to choose, moving to live in another country, etc. Preferentialists often assume that the notion of preference is just as applicable to all choices. But some theorists, like Ullmann-Margalit (2006) and Egonsson (2007), have worried about *big decisions* posing a special problem for preferentialism, or rational-choice theory in general. In the present paper, it will be argued that these worries should be taken seriously, and that we should think of the notion of preference as primarily being applicable to smaller decisions, not the big ones. This then has consequences for how we should think about prospective and retrospective judgments about such big decisions.

## The Good and the Best

When it comes to matters of well-being, or the person's own good, philosophers typically identify *desire-fulfilment theories* (*e.g.*, Heathwood, 2016) as one of the main approaches. In terms of the relevant attitudinal states that matter for such theories, there are two key notions that tend to be appealed to, *desires* and *preferences*. Many philosophers use these loosely and interchangeably, but there is an important difference between the two: desires are *monadic* states, while preferences are *dyadic* – the latter are essentially comparative. This means that while desires can be useful for understanding what is *good* for us, just knowing the direction in which our desires run will not give an answer as to which of two options is the *better* or the *best* one. Since we typically cannot get everything we want, even if we start out with considering what we desire, we ultimately tend to end up with questions about what we prefer or should prefer.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One can certainly talk about *strengths* of relevant desires (or pro-attitudes in general) and possibly compare these in order to determine what is best for us, but it is far from clear that we have a good grasp of what desire strength would mean, which would not ultimately turn on what we prefer; see Barrett (2019: 234-37) for a discussion of some of the options.

If we look to adjacent areas of inquiry, like decision theory and economics, the notion of preference is the central notion, but then there is also a live question about how it should be interpreted, where some favor a *mentalistic* interpretation, *i.e.*, preferences as motivational states in agents, capable of explaining why an agent did what she did, whereas others favor a behavioral interpretation, the *revealed-preference* account, where preferences just describe choice behavior. A lot of the modeling done by decision theorists and economists does not necessarily hinge on taking either stance, but we can still wonder both about which interpretation that is typically being assumed and which one is most reasonable. Hausman (2012) argues for the mentalistic interpretation on both points, but there are those who disagree, *e.g.*, Angner (2018) raising doubts about the first one, and Thoma (2021) about the second. Philosophers of well-being presumably tend towards some version of the mentalistic interpretation, however, since they will want an account of the good as rooted in motivational or evaluative mental states of the agent. To the extent that a mentalistic account of preferences makes sense, they can however potentially lean on well-developed accounts of rational choice that have been advanced within decision theory and economics.

What is a preference, then? Hausman (2012: 35) argues that preferences should be understood as *total subjective comparative evaluations*, and Bradley (2017: 47) puts forward a similar account: “a preference for  $\alpha$  over  $\beta$  is best viewed as an all-things-considered comparative judgement that  $\alpha$  is better than  $\beta$  that is instantiated in a disposition to choose the former over the latter when both are available”. This is a type of account that should be in line with how many philosophers talk about preferences. According to it, if we prefer A over B there is no room for further evaluation between having this preference and deciding which of A and B that is the best. It is of course perfectly possible to speak loosely in terms of preferences also with respect to partial rankings, say, *e.g.*, one’s preferences over wines simply by taste, but the notion of preference proposed by Hausman and Bradley involves all-relevant-things-considered rankings. In terms of what determines what is *best* for us, this would seem to be the relevant notion.

As a *descriptive* model, there are probably few people (at least by now) who think that rational choice unqualifiedly describes how human beings function all the time. But as an idealization, it is still possible that this kind of modeling allows us to make sense of much of the basic dynamics of human decision-making. Economics is probably the clearest example of a discipline where such models are used, and where the idea arguably is that findings about what idealized people would choose, and what would happen because of those choices, tell us something about the dynamics of choice in the real world.<sup>2</sup> This type of model might however also be understood in a different way, namely as articulating an *ideal* of rationality, *i.e.*, as a normative

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<sup>2</sup> Sugden (2009: 7) notes that economists are not always explicit about how they view the relation between their models and the real world, but contends that “[i]ntuitively, they believe that their models support conjecture about the real world”.

theory. The idea then is that both we and these theoretical constructs belong to the general kind *decision-makers* and that the constructs represent the perfection of being a decision-maker. The fact that we often fail to live up to the tenets of rational choice is as such no objection to it as a normative model – rather, it is a prerequisite.

It should be noted that if we opt for an account of preferences along the lines of Hausman and Bradley, then technically speaking, as actual human beings we often do not have preferences in that strict sense, since we will not have considered all relevant things. But even for everyday decision-making a distinction between partial and overall rankings would seem to make sense, so while the strict sense of preference is one that perhaps only characterizes a fully informed person, we can arguably be said to often at least approximate the forming of such preferences. And this account of rational choice could potentially then still serve as a kind of regulative ideal in our deliberations, as something that we could strive to emulate, and where good deliberation would be about informing ourselves and reflecting on that information in order to arrive at a sense of which options that we prefer, and in which order.

## Thinking About Big Decisions

While it might occasionally be difficult to compare even a literal apple to a literal orange, many of the everyday choices that we face are relatively straightforward, and because we have previous experience with the alternatives, or at least something in their vicinity, we know what we like and often we also know what we prefer and when among the things that we like. But sometimes we also face very different choices, ones where the alternatives are highly complex and where pursuing one alternative will shape the course of one's life. A big decision. Here is an example from Sumner (1996: 129):

Suppose that I find myself at a career crossroads when I am in college. On the one hand I am a star pitcher on the baseball team, courted by scouts who assure me that I have an excellent chance of making it to the major leagues. On the other hand I also have a brilliant record in philosophy, with the prospect of a career in university teaching. Up to now these two career paths have been compatible but now the former would lead me to the minor leagues while the latter would take me to graduate school. Because I realize that choosing either option will effectively foreclose the other, I investigate both as thoroughly as I can before deciding in favour of the long-range security of a teaching career. I go to graduate school, earn my doctorate, and land a job in a good philosophy department. There I find the demands of teaching and writing to be pretty well as I anticipated. Indeed, as the years pass everything goes more or less as expected except for the growing realization that this life is just not for me. My dissatisfaction at first manifests itself only in a free-floating irritability, but after a while it deepens into apathy and depression.

Everyone faces big decisions at some point in their lives, albeit perhaps not the exact choice between philosophy and baseball. The person in Sumner's example seems to have deliberated in accordance with rational choice as a regulative ideal, informing himself, reflecting, and forming a preference. But he ultimately still ends up with a sense of disappointment. A question that naturally invites itself is this: would he have been better off had he chosen differently?

Before we address such issues, we should first say something about the possible outcomes here. One possibility is that through careful philosophical work we can arrive at a conception of what grounds an option being better than another that will help us answer any such questions, or at the very least will make us confident in there typically being answers to them, even though epistemic limitations might often prevent us from arriving at those answers. But there is also another possibility. That careful reflection makes us realize that there often is no *best* option. The things that could ground an option being better than another might not always obtain. Indeed, there might be reason for thinking that they often will not, or even sometimes cannot. Of course, as a working hypothesis, this might sound partly defeatist, but we are not at the start of our collective inquiry here. Sometimes it might not be reasonable simply to keep on working under what might be called *the myth of the hidden* (Brännmark, 2021), assuming that there must be some theory X that will ultimately provide all the answers we initially want, and thinking that if a particular approach does not provide all those answers, there just has to be something wrong with it. Maybe we have already gotten all that there is to get.

Many theorists push more fundamental worries to the side in order to focus on more specific issues, but when it comes to the matter of there possibly being deeper problems with the idea of best options for big decisions, there are some philosophers who have pressed such fundamental worries. One example is Edna Ullmann-Margalit. Already in her early work with Sidney Morgenbesser (1977), she pointed to the limitations of standard rational-choice theory. The focus then was on very small choices, not just choices between apples and oranges, but between apples and apples. There are many situations where we just have to *pick* something, where there is no reason to prefer one thing over the other, but where we still have to actually move in order to get something. And we do. But the problem pointed to by Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser was not practical, it was theoretical: that a very common type of action is one for which rational-choice theory does not have an adequate account. Friends of rational-choice theory might perhaps shrug this off by pointing out that in cases of picking we do not need rational guidance – it is basically a coin toss. In Ullmann-Margalit's later work, she develops her worries further, however. She suggests (2006: 157) that rational-choice theory might be understood as analogous to classical Newtonian physics, which holds well for a middle range of objects, but not for the extreme micro and macro ends. Similarly, rational-choice models hold well for a range of middle-sized, ordinary decisions, but not when it comes to very small decisions, like picking, or very big ones. It is this latter class to which Sumner-style examples belong.

More precisely, Ullmann-Margalit is looking at decisions with the following four characteristics: (i) They are *transformative* or ‘core affecting’, changing one’s life projects, making one into a different person than one would otherwise be or become. (ii) They are *irrevocable*, and not in the trivial sense in which everything one does is irrevocable, but in that ordinary reversals are not possible. (iii) They are taken *in full awareness*, knowing that (a) one must make a genuine choice between viable alternatives, and (b) that the decision is transformative and irrevocable. (iv) The option not taken casts a *lingering shadow*; a consequence of full awareness is living with the option taken not just in isolation but in awareness of how it involved rejecting some other option. This kind of lingering shadow need not be about regret or disappointment, but it means that there is an added weightiness to how one decided.

Now, since there are four dimensions to how Ullmann-Margalit characterizes big decisions, it is possible that these might come apart, where some choices will have some of these but not all.<sup>3</sup> The first two features are also the ones that she highlights in her discussion, and which, she argues, are similar to how our reasons run out in cases of picking; they run out here as well. At least if you are a subjectivist about what is good for us, rationality operates within a certain frame of reference set by our beliefs and desires. But in making big decisions, we are in a way choosing such a framework, and “[i]f reasons are forever from within a system or a framework (Wittgenstein: from within a ‘language game’), the choice of the framework itself cannot be justified by appeal to reasons” (Ullmann-Margalit, 2006: 171). These are cases of *opting* for something, rather than making a choice that can be fully determined by reasons. For some of these choice situations, there might be ways of just partly committing to an alternative, trying it out while keeping a backdoor open, but such strategies are typically only partly available, and in some cases not fully committing to an option might mean that one will be living a lesser version of the life in question. She also notes that the “evidence seems to suggest that people are in fact more casual and cavalier in the way they handle their big decisions than in the way they handle their ordinary decisions” (Ullmann-Margalit, 2006: 165), that people often *drift* into certain life paths rather than consciously *opting* for them, perhaps partly because we find opting situations difficult to deal with.

Another philosopher who has raised a worry about big decisions is Dan Egonsson (2007). In looking at the type of information requirement that preferentialist accounts of the good often come with, Egonsson notes that while these standardly are framed in *quantitative* terms (having all the relevant information), there is arguably also a *qualitative* dimension, one that is not captured by a set of

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<sup>3</sup> Especially the *transformative* aspect has been the focus of some discussion in recent years, with Paul (2014) being a seminal work. Paul distinguishes between experiences being *personally* or *epistemically* transformative, where becoming a parent would exemplify both, but something like tasting durian fruit for the first time would just be epistemically transformative.

propositional attitudes such as beliefs.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Mary the fruit scientist might know everything about apples and everything about oranges, including how other people have described what it is like to eat them and how they taste. But until Mary has eaten both apples and oranges herself, can she really have a fully informed preference for one over the other? Something would seem to be missing.

This far, Egonsson's point mainly pertains to questions about how relevant certain theoretical constructs are to us as human beings (since these constructs are abstractions, they tend to be little more than bundles of propositional attitudes). But even if the qualitative dimension is important, for many of our everyday choices we already have the relevant experiences, or at least similar-enough experiences for being able to vividly imagine what it would be like to have one or the other of two options. Our real-life preferences can accordingly often have the relevant qualitative foundation. Egonsson worries, however, about choices like *becoming a philosopher*. If we take something like Sumner's example, the person could be understood as having been successful in vividly imagining the different *components* of the life. Maybe I can, already as a student, imagine what it is like to write a paper or to give a lecture, even though I have only done lesser versions of these up until that point. But leading a certain life involves doing things over and over again, and there are then cumulative effects that will shape how one's experience of these different components will evolve over time. Even if we can imagine what certain elements are like, and even if we might even imagine sequences of events in a certain order, such imaginings will inevitably be severely compressed. Something will still escape us, namely "the quality that is a result of experiencing every single element in the time sequence in a certain order and *tempo*" (Egonsson, 2007: 37). And unlike with learning about how different fruits taste, sampling will not work. Similar to Ullmann-Margalit, Egonsson identifies a problem having to do with scale: how a certain model of forming reasonable preferences might work well for many everyday smaller decisions, but not as well for highly complex macro decisions about things like which path one's life should take.

In addition to these worries, there is also another feature of big decisions that should be noted. Even to the extent that we form something like a preference for A over B, if it is a big decision, both A and B will inevitably be what might be called *skeletal* objects of choice. While the problem in cases of *picking* is that two objects are basically indistinguishable, so that there is nothing to set one option apart from the other, the problem here is rather that the options are not just neat packages where it is more-or-less determinate what one will get. There is no one way of being a philosopher (and no one way of being a baseball player either). Even if one has a more specific idea of, say, *being a philosopher* in mind, like Egonsson's (2007: 28) example of being a Wittgenstein-like philosopher, this is still a skeletal conception of a life as a philosopher, which can then be filled out in many different ways. Similarly with a type of choice that is often taken as a paradigmatic example of a

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<sup>4</sup> Egonsson is influenced here by the vividness requirement put forward by Brandt (1979: 111-12).



big decision: whether to become a parent or not. Even setting aside the difference, especially given the social expectations, of becoming a father or becoming a mother, children do not come out of a single mold. You never become a parent *simpliciter*, you become a parent of a specific child or, eventually, several specific children. Your experience will be very much colored by the quirks and traits that make any child into a specific human being. And while it seems unlikely that you can become a parent without certain shifts taking place in your life, these will still depend in exact character on what kind of work you have, what your other social relations are like, and so on. In short, while parents will certainly share some broad types of experiences that non-parents will lack, one should not assume that there is such a thing as *the* experience of being a parent. An important part of this variability is that the kind of skeletal objects which feature in the relevant preferences will entangle with other parts of our lives. If I choose a life in academia then that will surely influence what my parenthood will look like, and if I choose to become a parent that will shape my career in academia. It is not like choosing an apple over an orange at  $t_1$  and then just having that apple.

Now, the mere fact that the exact outcomes of our choices are complex and involve elements of chance is not as such a problem for traditional rational-choice models or expected-utility theory. They are built precisely to handle that. There is accordingly an obvious strategy that one might pursue when conceptualizing big decisions: to think of them in terms of choices over complex lotteries. However, we would then run into a version of Ullmann-Margalit's point about scale: the fact that a certain solution works for certain kinds of choices does not mean that it works for all. To begin with, the lotteries in question would have to be very, very, very complex, because the different exact permutations that options like "having a career in philosophy" or "being a parent" will have are really multifarious, especially since these are options that interact with options from other choice situations that we face. While there are many mid-sized choices that are also uncertain in some respects, for such choices we might still be capable of assigning meaningful subjective probabilities to different possible outcomes (even if these are just estimates), but when we are considering possible life paths there will always be many unknown unknowns, if for no other reason than that such life paths unfold over several decades and will thus be entangled with large societal developments as well. It is simply impossible to know all the possible component and sub-component outcomes to which the relevant subjective probabilities would have to be assigned. There is radical uncertainty here. Philosophers often focus on examples which are designed so that we know all that matters about what will happen in the different options that we face, but as Jacobson (2013: 121) points out this often means that one "ignores the commonplace uncertainty under which we make decisions." For smaller decisions, this simplification can perhaps be warranted, but not for big decisions.

As already pointed out, there is a worry about how much idealization that will have to be involved in conceiving of which preferences that would be reasonable to

form. In potentially conceiving of big decisions in terms of choices over complex lotteries, where the agent would fully know and understand these lotteries, we would need to move up to not just superhuman but god-like cognitive and precognitive capacities. This looks like a move that would be made on pain of irrelevance. Another possibility here, in order to find a role for rational-choice models to play, might be to bracket some of the complexities involved in big decisions and just focus on their main salient features. To some extent this is probably what we actually tend to do in real life, but it is less clear if this is viable as a form of rational choice – it would seem to involve an arbitrariness in demarcating which considerations enter into our decision-making, an exercise in pretending that we are making a choice of a certain kind, when it is really a choice of a very different kind.

## Prospective and Retrospective Judgments

The worries stated above about the limited applicability of rational-choice thinking should not be taken to mean that we can make no reasonable judgments whatsoever about different paths our lives can take. At the very least, some possibilities can be just obviously bad. If someone risks a life of being held captive and tortured for decades, then the finer points of not being able to imagine such a life because of how it would transform the person, how the tortures will be experienced in a drawn-out way, or because there are many different more precise ways in which the details can be filled out, pose no problem for being able to conclude that such a life would just be bad. But in the big decisions that matter, our interest lies not with the options that we already know are bad, but rather the options which have something going for them and where we want to know which option is the *best* one. This is where rational-choice thinking runs into problems with handling big decisions.

Now, it is often pointed out that in thinking about what is good or best for us, and which actions or events that might benefit us, there are two main perspectives that one can take, that of the *agent* and that of the *spectator*. But there is also another distinction between perspectives, one that is orthogonal to the first one, namely between the *prospective* and the *retrospective* – before and after a specific choice. Philosophers have often focused on prospective judgments, at least when it comes to agents.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to spectators, things are different, partly because one of the main tasks that we have as spectators is to react to what people have done. But with respect to agents, one might think that what really matters is getting the prospective judgments right – doing the right thing. With respect to such judgments, the problem of big decisions does not mean that we should toss the idea of being

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<sup>5</sup> One important exception to this is the notion of *regret*, where there is a relatively extensive literature (e.g., Williams, 1981; Bagnoli, 2000; Jacobson, 2013), but often this is a discussion about *moral* rather than *prudential* choices.

informed to the side, staying misinformed can still be unreasonable. The problem is rather that there is a limit to how far informing ourselves and deliberating on that information can take us. At a certain point, all that remains is something like a leap of faith (*cf.* Ullmann-Margalit, 2006: 172).

Yet even if it is true that prospective judgments are *more* important than retrospective ones, this does not mean that the latter are unimportant. For moral choices this might be obvious – it is difficult to see how we would be able to develop as moral agents without considering our past actions and learning from them. To a significant extent, the role of retrospective judgments in such cases is however largely prospective – it is oriented towards future choices of the same kind. One characteristic of big decisions, however, is that typically they do not involve learning experiences of this kind. If I choose to become a philosopher, in the sense of having a whole career in the discipline, it is not as if I then become better equipped to make that kind of choice the next time I am faced with it. Similarly, if one becomes a parent, then one is (barring tragic outcomes) a parent for the rest of one's life. Still, most of us do occasionally think retrospectively about such choices, wondering whether we made the right decision.

If we consider Sumner's example, it features the agent in both the prospective and the retrospective situation. Prospectively, he is facing a big decision, trying to make it in an informed way, thinking through both options thoroughly. But it is ultimately a situation where, even when being informed about the options, there is no knowing how either option will play out more precisely and how they will be experienced by him, especially over time. Retrospectively, he might find that he made a mistake, perhaps a faultless one, but still a mistake. How should we think about such retrospective judgments? As already pointed out, the notion of preference is essentially comparative, so at first sight it seems well-suited for guiding such judgments, maybe one was wrong in preferring one option over the other? But as already indicated, it is far from clear whether this type of model is applicable here. The person in Sumner's example cannot know what his life as a professional baseball player would have been like if he had gone down that path instead. Indeed, that life path could have played out in multiple ways. It is also quite possible that there are other versions of life as a philosopher that could have been his given various circumstantial factors playing out in certain ways, and where his feelings would be different. There could also have been other aspects of his life that turned out differently, and where these would be entangled with his professional life in ways that made him feel differently.

In looking at the paths our lives take, one aspect of the problem of big decisions is precisely that things are not determined once and for all by those big decisions, but that a number of small choices and events gradually put flesh on the basic skeletal object we opted for, and where we might never know where various such (in one sense) small variations will ultimately take us. Let us look at another example. Say that one decides to study philosophy at university. Even if one has certain ideas in place providing some direction, like wanting to study at a place

dominated by analytic philosophy, there are invariably more fine-grained details about exactly where and when one studies, who one's teachers and classmates are, and which key texts that one reads in one's formative years, details that all contribute to shaping the trajectory that one's philosophical life will take. For instance, with regard to myself, on my very first philosophy course I had a great teacher in the history of moral philosophy, who also happened to use as a main text for that course a book with a fairly Hegelian take on this history (a somewhat unusual choice given that it was predominately an analytic-philosophy department). And to some extent, if I look back at my own trajectory, it has been one of doing philosophy largely in the analytic vein, but with persistent Hegelian tendencies, and usually with an eye to the historical tradition of which one's own work forms a (very) small part. It is of course impossible to know what would have happened if that had not been my first course. Obviously, it spoke to me in a way that probably required some latent tendencies already to be in place, but we can have many such tendencies, and depending on which concrete environments that we end up in, different ones might come to dominate. So maybe if I had studied philosophy somewhere else, my trajectory would have been quite different. Better or worse? There is no retrospective standpoint from which that judgment can be made in a determinate way – depending on which more specific shape one's path in philosophy (or in any other career, for that matter) takes, one's standards of what is worthwhile, interesting, and valuable will be different. One's attempts at retrospective judgments are inevitably made *within* a framework.

Or take another example, this time from literature – both in the sense that it comes from a novel and that it is about the life of a professor of literature. The novel is *Stoner* (Williams, 1965), which takes us through the relatively unremarkable life of William Stoner, and in large parts it is about a life spent in academia.<sup>6</sup> One thing that this story captures well is how chance plays a role in putting flesh on the skeletal life paths that we opt for. On one occasion, Stoner fails a student that is a protégé of one of his colleagues. While he was aware of how this would upset his colleague, he felt that this was simply something he had to do. However, then it turns out that this is not just something that eventually blows over, but that his colleague will hold a grudge for years to come, even when he becomes head of department. In one way, it is just a petty grudge, but it becomes something that has a big impact on how Stoner's life unfolds. In this type of case, it might seem straightforward that Stoner's life would have been better if the whole incident with this student had not happened. On one reading, it is simply an incident of a kind that takes place within a given framework, and which can then be assessed based on the values and goals of that framework. This is the case with many of the small decisions and events that contribute to putting flesh on the bones of the skeletal life paths that we have opted for. Nevertheless, some choices that are small in one sense might at the same time constitute possible important forks in the road, even while staying on the same basic

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<sup>6</sup> For a nuanced and philosophically informed reading of *Stoner*, see Gävertsson (2020).

life path. While it seems clear that it would have been better for Stoner if he had not faced the decision of failing that student, it is less clear that he made the wrong choice when faced by it. He could certainly have acted differently, but maybe that would ultimately have meant a life led with less integrity. Which would be better? A life with more integrity or a life with more external accomplishments? As spectators (here: readers) we might not be able to tell. What we do know is that towards the end of the novel, Stoner does engage in retrospective thinking and he is, on the whole, content with his life. There might not be an answer as to whether it was the *best* life he could have led, but retrospectively it can still reasonably be understood as good enough for a human life.

What these examples point to is a kind of mixed subjectivist view. Preferences can still matter, when there are preferences, in the sense of informed all-relevant-things-considered comparative evaluations, to be had. For many choices and situations, we might however instead think in terms of *desires* (or other monadic pro-attitudes) rather than *preferences* as the central attitudes in terms of which we understand what is good for us. Of course, as already mentioned, it is relatively common among philosophers to think of desires as relevant motivational/evaluative attitudes, but then that often involves a kind of pure desire view. What is suggested here is instead a more complex position, where preferences are the relevant attitudes with respect to those choices for which preferences make sense, *i.e.*, for choices between different middle-sized objects (so to speak). For many such decisions, there are accordingly really options that are the *best* ones. We might not always know which, but in such cases there can be something like the right answer to the question about what to choose, and we can meaningfully try to deliberate, informing ourselves and imagining what the options would be like, under the regulative ideal of rational choice.

For big decisions, however, there will typically not be any *best* option, because there is no rational way of preferring one option to the other. There can however still be *largely good* and *largely bad* trajectories that our lives can take, both in terms of the basic skeletal options and in terms of how the relevant life paths play out more concretely. Even if we cannot say what would be *best*, as subjectivists about the good, we can at least say things like these: If a person is dissatisfied with her life, then there is a problem. If a person ends up reasonably satisfied, there is arguably no problem: one has at least ended up on the good side of things. Within a certain life path, there might be changes that can be made to how we lead it that would be improvements. But at a certain point, some possible changes will become so drastic that they would have transformed the entire framework of evaluation, and all that might then remain to be said is that such an alternative life path would simply have been different from the one we actually took.

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