

Values, Preferences, Meaningful Choice*

Joe Edelman[†]

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Abstract

Many fields (social choice, welfare economics, recommender systems) assume people express what benefits them via their ‘revealed preferences.’ Revealed preferences have well-documented problems when used this way, but are hard to displace in these fields because, as an information source, they are simple, universally applicable, robust, and high-resolution. In order to compete, other information sources (about participants’ values, capabilities and functionings, etc) would need to match this. I present a conception of values as *attention policies resulting from constitutive judgments*, and use it to build an alternative preference relation, Meaningful Choice, which retains many desirable features of revealed preference.

Introduction

In his 1938 paper introducing revealed preference, Samuelson¹ warned:

I should like to state my personal opinion that nothing said here... touches upon at any point the problem of welfare economics, except in the sense of revealing the confusion in the traditional theory of these distinct subjects.

Similar sentiments followed, in Arrow,² Sen,³ Anderson,⁴ etc. As an information basis for welfare, optimality, social choice, etc, revealed preference has been much critiqued.

All the same, it’s hard to see how to move away from it, without paternalism: if people know best for their own lives—shouldn’t we trust their choices as the final proof of their intentions? How else can we avoid imposing “better values” from above?

One way to respond is to say that people *do* know best, and have wise values, but that their revealed preferences aren’t the last word on those values. But to establish this, you’d want another source of information on people’s values—one that retains much of the resolution, robustness, universal applicability, and democratic simplicity of preference.

Such an information source will be developed here by taking two ‘steps back’ from revealed preference, widening the information collected. This source corresponds with one definition of “values” used in common speech, and can be used in social choice and welfare calculations.

To explicate this source, I include an interview structure, by which an agent’s values can be collected, and a choice

assessed to see if it was expressive of those values. The goal is to give an idea what questions could be asked, and what answers might suffice to show that an agent has this value or that, or that a revealed preference was a meaningful choice.

This interview structure isn’t suitable for collecting data at the scale needed for welfare calculations, social choice mechanisms, or recommender systems, but

future work, I hope that hundreds of such conversations will teach us how to build automated, interactive “assisted introspection” systems to replace these manual interviews, and that data from tens of thousands of automated interactions will, in turn, lead to techniques for inferring values from other, readily-available data.

Preferences

A rich literature covers how revealed preferences—which, when summed up, are called *engagement metrics*—lead us astray. You can often get people to choose something without serving their real interests: you can misinform them, or leverage their misplaced hopes.

Or, you can make it so people *need* your thing for what once was possible without it: they need your car to get to work, your social media account to find a job, your dress to socialize with their friends, etc.

More broadly, you can manufacture social circumstances where people choose your thing to “keep up with the Joneses,” to signal allegiance with their tribe, or because they’ve lost the ability to coordinate a real solution.⁵

In some cases, the person will know their choice doesn’t express their true interests—that they are bucking to external pressure, caught in the system, or setting aside their goals to conform to a social rule.⁶ In other cases, options have been limited or biased behind our backs.

Given these problems, why does revealed preference still play a role in notions of benefit and measures of optimality? It has huge advantages as an information source: in the resolution and robustness of the data provided, its near-universal applicability, and the democratic simplicity of its collection:

- Preferences say fine-grained things how about each of us wants to live, informed by our local situations and priorities.
- Preferences get at what we choose in the final analysis, our *real*, battle-tested priorities, not just what we *say* we want.

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[†]School for Social Design joe.edelman@gmail.com

¹“A Note on the Pure Theory of Consumer’s Behaviour.”

²*Social Choice and Individual Values*.

³“Rational Fools.”

⁴“Symposium on Amartya Sen’s Philosophy.”

⁵See discussions of the prisoner’s dilemma in e.g., Sen, “Behaviour and the Concept of Preference”; Anderson, “Symposium on Amartya Sen’s Philosophy.”

⁶See Sen, “Rational Fools”; Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* on ‘commitment.’

- Preferences work in many domains of life, and represent all-things-considered judgements, combining morality, prudence, whims, etc.
- Finally, those who aren't introspective or eloquent can still express a preference. And preferences leave simple-to-understand, verifiable trails: purchase histories, voting records, etc.

Attentional Policies

I'll try to address the problems with preference, holding on to these benefits. To do so, I want to take two 'steps back.' The first step is to widen the conception of choice to include option set formation.

A revealed preference takes the options as given. As other authors have pointed out,⁷ this doesn't fully reflect how choice works.

Consider my choice, with colleagues, to say something witty. At t_1 , I choose to say *that* in particular (over staying silent, or saying my second-place quip). But, at some earlier point t_0 , I decided to invest my attention in finding witty things to say. I've tried witty phrases on in my mind, and tested situations for witty reframings.

At t_0 , I made a much bigger choice—I adopted⁸ an attentional policy of 'looking for witty quips and reframes.' This is how I assembled the option set for my choice at t_1 .

I think this earlier choice, at t_0 , reveals more about me than the latter one. Indeed, these **attentional policies (APs)** might account for much of what's called my "personality": When making friends, am I cautious or bold? When considering a purchase, is my focus on price, quality, or durability? When speaking, do I try to be witty, precise, or down to earth? These may not just be "character traits" I was born with, but policies I adopted, which work together for my way of life.⁹

Collecting an agent's APs is part of my proposal to improve the information basis of welfare, social choice, and recommenders. How could that work? You could use an interactive survey to collect the contexts in which the agent makes choices and evaluates options (socializing, at work, in difficult conversations), and have them pick what they attend to most in each.¹⁰

If they claim to have AP a in context c , you could verify that with followup questions (as in figure 1): First, you could ask them about recent moments in c , and what options they've found using a . Someone with a policy of vulnerability should be able to cough up various opportunities for vulnerability, recently considered; some taken, some not.

⁷Smaldino and Richerson, "The Origins of Options."

⁸I adopt APs (just like I make plans, adopt heuristics, comply with norms, follow through with intentions) because my bounded rationality and social needs make it expedient. (Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*; Simon, "A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice"; Taylor, *The Language Animal*)

⁹This characterization of an identity as composed of APs shares something with Anderson, "Symposium on Amartya Sen's Philosophy"; and Velleman, *Practical Reflection*.

¹⁰Social attestations, also, could be a source of AP information: someone who is widely admired for their wit likely has an AP about it. Behavioral data may also work: if someone shops by price or by quality, that may show up in purchase or click data. (Using, perhaps, approaches like Chang, *Making Comparisons Count*; or Levi, *Hard Choices*)

Additionally, that person will also know when *exactly* vulnerability is called for, and when something else takes the fore. I don't try to be vulnerable when giving directions to a stranger, or with my dad. Generally, someone with a in c will have detailed information about the shape of c .

Supposing we collected an agent's APs. How would that compare with revealed preference data, in terms of resolution, robustness, universality, and democratic simplicity?

Like preferences, APs are informed by our local situations and priorities, and say fine-grained things about how we want to live. Indeed, they have a higher resolution than I've let on so far: an AP about 'honesty' or 'vulnerability' is always short for a more specific policy, like "attend to what I feel about each thing we discuss, and let my feeling show," or "attend to false impressions a listener may get from my statements, and head them off with a disclaimer." That is: having honesty as a policy requires a substantive interpretation of honesty, and these differ from person to person.

APs are battle-tested. I wish I could craft my words to simultaneously be kind, honest, tactful, humble, and inspiring. I wish I could, at the same moment, be precise in my speech, aware how each word lands, aware of my own feelings; transparent, calm, and centered; passionate; physically graceful, like a dancer. But APs *compete* for my attention. So, my choice to look for witty things to say crowds out many other options.

Like preferences, APs are applicable across all domains in life—the moral, the self-interested, etc, and apply to many kinds of contexts.

But, they score worse on democratic simplicity than revealed preference. And, for now, it's unclear how an agent's APs would provide a substitute for revealed preference. I'll get to that.

Constitutive Judgement

In this section, I want to distinguish between two types of APs. Some, I claim, are part of our conception of what it is to live well. If a is one of those, then a life in which I never attend to a will seem somehow less of a life. Diminished.

Not every AP is like this. Look at these three cases:

- (1) I watch the road while driving. I don't want to crash.
- (2) I'm careful with my speech at work. My boss fires anyone who speaks imprecisely.
- (3) I've decided to be more honest with friends. I recently opened up to a friend about a struggle I'm having. Since then, the relationship feels more intimate, and stronger; it's easier for me to think about what to say; my friend is unexpectedly helpful.

Would I feel my life were diminished, if I never attended to the road, or to pleasing my boss? No, I don't think so. But my life *would* seem lesser, if I never attended to being honest with friends.

Let us give a name to APs of the latter type: APs without which my life would seem somehow lesser. Let's call them *Constitutive Attentional Policies*, or CAPs.

Choice		Potential APs		Does this person really have this AP?				
breakfast cereal (while supermarket shopping)		What's common across the option set?	What makes the RP superior?		When do you look for this?	Are there exceptions? (i.e., do you have detailed contextual knowledge?)	Used in other option sets? (i.e., do you have history surfacing these options?)	
Revealed preference	Option set							
cheap müsli	corn flakes cheap müsli fancy müsli	easy to prepare	easy to prepare	easy to prepare	shopping for myself	✓ cooking for others, a special day of cooking	✓ spinach salads, tuna, bread & cheese	✓
		filling		filling	most food choices	✓ gourmet meals	✓ beef stew	✓
			cheap	cheap	shopping for myself	✓ gourmet meals	✓ lidl veggies	✓
			feel good after	feel good after	most food choices	✓ food experiments & adventures	✓ mozz, salmon	✓

Figure 1: Finding and verifying the APs behind a choice: Breakfast Cereal

We can go quite deep in distinguishing CAPs from other APs. At one level, this question (whether life would be diminished) marks out a set of APs which are part of a **densely connected core**.

We can picture our ideas about the good life as an interlocking web of values and practices, tightly connected. In this densely connected core, any particular value (such as attending to taste) acts to support many other ways of attending and living, which are also part of this core. This means that CAPs will tend to be adopted for broad benefits.

Non-CAPs (or *Instrumental Attentional Policies*) will, on other hand, tend to be outside this core, but pointing towards it. In the directed graph of benefits, you can think of them as thin lines that lead *towards* that densely connected center of the good life, but aren't themselves densely-connected or within the core. When you ask why someone's adopted an IAP, you'll get narrower, specific reasons, that depend on a context.

This may sound like a difference of degree, but I believe there is also a difference in kind. Specifically, a different kind of reasoning is used to justify attending to an IAP vs a CAP.

IAPs are adopted due to instrumental reasoning.

The benefits come together to make the case that doing *a* in *c* is functional, necessary, prudent, or expedient. The judgement is based on expected costs and benefits, much as a rational choice theorist would hope. I'll call this an *instrumental judgement*.

CAPs are adopted due to constitutive reasoning. In (3), the benefits become supporting evidence for a much larger claim: that honesty with friends is *constitutive* of good relationships¹¹, or at least naturally goes together with them. The benefits suggest—not just that honesty is functional in achieving certain ends—but that honesty will be part of any relationship I want to build, or part of the person I want to be. Whereas an instrumental judgement relies on a claim about cause and effect, this is a part-whole claim, or a claim to synergy.

I'll call this a *constitutive judgement*. To make one, we ask ourselves questions like: are Xs impossible without Ys? Are Xs without Ys in some way lesser? Are there kinds of

wholeness that emerge only when an X has a Y? Note: the evidence that goes into these questions looks *a lot* like costs and benefits (additional kinds of wholeness, etc)! So the raw materials for this judgement are similar, but instead of building an expected value, we build a more general conclusion.

Why do we make constitutive judgements, instead of doing a cost-benefit analysis for everything? Other authors have marked out a role for constitutive judgements in moral reasoning,¹² higher-order desires,¹³ self-understanding,¹⁴ and identifying natural kinds,¹⁵ but there's also a case to be made from bounded rationality:¹⁶ constitutive judgements are cognitively efficient. Instead of asking each time we have an X, whether we should also have an Y, we ask up-front if Xs and Ys belong together. If we think so, we put Ys in our Xs without considering each case.

So, we can take a second “step back” from preference and consider how APs are adopted, and what kind of relation they have to each other. Say an agent uses AP *a* in context *c*.

First, you can ask her: why is *a* wise in *c*? Does she give a small number of reasons, pointing towards one state of the world, *s*, that she's working to achieve, maintain, or ensure (such as ‘staying alive,’ or ‘keeping her job’)? Or does she give diffuse, unconnected reasons, and sense she's only *just begun* discovering the benefits of *a* in *c*?

Second, do the given reasons seem to capture her full rationale? If so, it's likely an IAP. To test this, ask her how she'd feel if they were taken out of consideration (e.g., if she discovered she'd crash anyways, that her speech had no bearing on whether she'd be fired, or that, without opening up to friends, she could magically get the same benefits): Would she select a different AP for *c* and consider herself better off, free to focus on something else? Similarly, would she consider it a net gain if she could clone herself, and have the clone handle doing *a* in *c*? Or otherwise automate the achievement of *s*? Or—on the other hand—would she

¹²Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.

¹³Taylor, “4 What Is Human Agency?”

¹⁴Velleman, *Practical Reflection*.

¹⁵Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist.”

¹⁶Following Simon, “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice”; Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*; and Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*.

¹¹Good relationships for *this* agent, at least.

reserve for herself the task of doing *a* rather than give it to the clone?

Finally, while doing *a*, does she split her attention, putting some attention on how *s* is going, so that she can reconsider, if needed, the efficacy of *a* in achieving *s*? Or is her attention is wholly on *a*, with no worry about what she’s achieving/maintaining/ensuring?

Is it a CAP?					
	Is attending to <i>a</i> part of an activity you're committed to, that'd be worse without it?	How do things work out, when you attend to <i>a</i> ?	If <i>x</i> would work out anyways, would you still attend to <i>a</i> ?	As you attend to <i>a</i> , do you also check if <i>x</i> ?	
easy to prepare		get quickly to work			
filling	no	can focus on work	would focus elsewhere	do monitor if it's working out	
cheap		don't go broke			
feel good after	✓ eating w. intention	self-care, joy, energy, integrity	✓ keep attending	✓ don't check	✓

Figure 2: Breakfast CAPs

I’ve found that these conditions almost always coincide. An AP adopted for diffuse reasons will tend to have someone’s whole attention, and they’ll be resistant to automating it. A strong sign it’s a CAP.

Values as CAPs

I want to suggest that an agent’s CAPs deserve to be called their values, in at least two everyday¹⁷ senses of the word. I’ll illustrate this with a personal story:

Earlier in my career, I chose work colleagues for their brilliance, efficacy, and a shared sense of play. One day, with one colleague in particular, I recognized a different thing we shared: we were excited to participate in the same long-term trends. This felt meaningful.

Later, when choosing teammates, I began to look for this alignment first. My teams now seem more likely to stick together, and we have new types of conversations.

But even if I knew my teams *wouldn’t* last longer, or if those conversations were somehow blocked from happening, I’d still hire with this in mind.

In this story, I gained a CAP. Did I gain a value? I think so. But before going into it, I’ll bracket off one common sense of “values” which *doesn’t* fit CAPs. I didn’t gain a ‘social vision’: a vision of what’s right for everyone, or for a group (e.g., what a family should be like, how a father should behave, what a nation should be like). I didn’t gain a political cause (like inclusiveness, freedom, etc), nor a standard to which I’ll push others to conform, or try to conform myself (like masculine or feminine dress-codes).

¹⁷In philosophical writing, values are often considered as evaluative criteria or attitudes (Chang, “All Things Considered”, Velleman, *Practical Reflection*). My treatment of them as policies works there too, I think: an evaluative attitude or criterion can be viewed as something a person does when making an evaluation or choice. But that’s not our topic here.

CAPs have little to do with this use of the word “values.”¹⁸ But, two other uses of the word fit snugly:

First, we use values for the things that feel right and meaningful when you do them—such as being vulnerable, taking stage, being creative, etc. My CAP fits, in this sense.

Second, we use values—in expressions like “the values of science” or “democratic values”—for the individual sources of meaning that keep institutions working. So, a scientist’s values might include intellectual humility, passionate pursuit of the truth, etc. Things that are both meaningful for scientists, and needed to keep the institution of science on the rails.

Why do CAPs highlight the latter, which we might call *institutional meanings*? For two reasons: First, they are likely to have been judged constitutive of the practice of science. More importantly, they filter out what’s been adopted in that practice for merely instrumental reasons—what’s done merely to keep your job, to fit in with colleagues, or to achieve specific goals. So, a scientist’s CAPs will not include what they do merely to get tenure, to amass citations, etc. This means CAPs exclude all the perverse incentives (often arising from coordination problems¹⁹) which clutter up institutions, but include what’s considered constitutive. Institutional meanings show up clearly.

Figure 3: CAPs from our database, meaning.supplies.

Meaningful Choice

Finally, I want to suggest that some revealed preferences are more expressive of our values, and should count more in welfare calculations, recommender systems, and social choice.

Consider the preference of Janet, who takes a job at Soul-crushingjobs.com. She says:

It’s the only way my kids can eat. If I didn’t go work there, I’d feel a crushing guilt. And my kids

¹⁸While people often try to be *inclusive* or *feminine* based on such a vision, if this is done merely to spread a social vision, to conform with one, or otherwise to bring about a social change, it’s an IAP.

¹⁹APs may offer an account for the rationality of collective action—compared to the prisoner’s dilemma arguments in Anderson, “Symposium on Amartya Sen’s Philosophy” and Sen, “Behaviour and the Concept of Preference”. In contrast, my approach follows Velleman, *Self to Self*, ch 11, closely.

might get taken away. Also, I believe in taking responsibility for my family, and this is the way to do that.

We can inquire about her choice of Soulcruushingjobs.com: what APs led Janet towards this option?

1. Let's first verify that "taking responsibility" is a CAP for her. We ask her when that AP is important, and how she decided it's important then. If she knows the context well, and adopted via a constitutive judgement, it's a CAP.
2. Now, we can list options she considered along the way, along with the contexts and APs responsible for surfacing and narrowing those options. Various candidates emerge for the main AP: Was she searching for ways to take responsibility? Or, was she searching for any job to feed her family. These would look very different: if her CAP drove her search, she would have found a wide variety of ways to take responsibility as part of her search. If, on the other hand, she was more focused on finding any job that'd feed her family, we would expect a narrower collection of options.

Major role in choice?				Meaningful choice?			
	Were all considered options a?	Or, is the winner more a than alternatives?			Major role in choice?	Is it a CAP?	
easy to prepare	✓	-	✓	easy to prepare	✓	✗	✗
filling	✓	-	✓	filling	✓	✗	✗
cheap	✗	✓	✓	cheap	✓	✗	✗
feel good after	✗	✗	✗	feel good after	✗	✓	✗

Figure 4: Verifying MCs

This makes a huge difference: if Janet's job search was about taking responsibility, she was guided by her values in searching, and we can take her choice as an expression of those values. If, however, her search was driven mainly by IAPs, like trying desperately to feed her family, her it's less about values, and more about a tough situation. She's bucking to external pressure, caught in the system, or setting aside her goals to conform to a social rule.

Should we consider such a choice to be a revealed preference? If anything, Janet's preference is not for soulcrushingjobs.com, but for a better situation, where she *could* choose by her values.

My suggestion is to modify welfare calculations, recommender systems, and social choice to count these choices differently: to collect information about the APs driving a choice, and whether they are CAPs or IAPs, and to restrict the preference relation to only count *meaningful choices*—choices that are expressive of values.²⁰

This would avoid rewarding actors who rig the game: who force people's hands, tilt the playing field, etc, to drive people towards their option.

A further step would count incidences of meaningful vs. non-meaningful choice as expressing second-order preferences

²⁰Maintaining the normal structure of welfare economics, see Bernheim and Rangel, "Beyond Revealed Preference."

about choice *environments*. A non-meaningful choice is an opportunity to ask the agent if they wish their choice *situation* had been different. This is additional information that could be worked into welfare and social choice (although I'm not sure how).

Conclusion

The refined preference relation I've described requires additional information from the agent. But this information retains many advantages of revealed preference: it's universally applicable, high-resolution, and robust in the sense that it captures hard-boiled trade-offs.

Where it most clearly falls short, is with what I've called democratic simplicity. CAP-information requires more introspection, more articulacy, and is much harder to verify.

I'm not sure these challenges can be overcome, but there are promising avenues for research:

- Rich, interactive experiences can help people uncover their CAPs,
- CAPs can be inferred from other data,
- Visualizations and cryptography can make CAP data understandable and auditable, so decisions based on meaningful choice can be legitimated.

In many areas, a misalignment between preferences and values plagues our society: clickbait, internet addiction, populist politics, obesity, and various forms of institutional rot. If CAP-based approaches to welfare, recommender systems, and social choice can help, it seems worth the research effort.

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