Von Wright’s “The Logic of Preference” revisited

Fenrong Liu

Abstract Preference is a key area where analytic philosophy meets philosophical logic. I start with two related issues: reasons for preference, and changes in preference, first mentioned in von Wright’s book *The Logic of Preference* but not thoroughly explored there. I show how these two issues can be handled together in one dynamic logical framework, working with structured two-level models, and I investigate the resulting dynamics of reason-based preference in some detail. Next, I study the foundational issue of entanglement between preference and beliefs, and relate the resulting richer logics to belief revision theory and decision theory.

Keywords Preference · Reasons · Dynamics · Beliefs · Priorities

Analytic philosophy is well-known for its emphasis on clarity in philosophical formulation and argument, and modern formal logic and informal analysis of language go together well as tools for this purpose. Philosophical logics are often constructed based on philosophical analysis of a certain concept, illustrating the clarity in a more visible way. In return, new logics become new tools suggesting new philosophical notions. I am interested in a harmonious interplay between analytic philosophy and philosophical logic, where ideas can flow both ways. In this article, I will take the case of preference as a typical example, a crucial notion guiding rational choice and action. Starting with von Wright’s work, *The Logic of Preference*, where he gave a philosophical analysis of preference, and also a first logical system that became very
influential, I hope to show how modern logic can add further technical sophistication, while also raising new philosophical questions.

1 Introduction: two issues left out by von Wright

Preference is what colors our view of the world, and it drives the actions that we take in it. Moreover, we influence each other’s preferences all the time by making evaluative statements, uttering requests, commands, and statements of fact that exclude or open up the possibility of certain actions. Naturally, a phenomenon of this wide importance has been studied in many disciplines, especially in philosophy and the social sciences. This article takes a further formal point of view, being devoted to logical systems that describes both the structure of preferences, and how they may change. Our starting point is in the days when preference was first fully discussed by the famous philosopher–logician Georg Henrik von Wright.

In his seminal book *The Logic of Preference: An Essay*, von Wright (1963) started with a major distinction among the concepts that interest moral philosophers. He divided them into the following three categories (though, of course, there may be border-line cases):

– *deontological* or *normative*: right and duty, command, permission, and prohibition,
– *axiological*: good and evil, the comparative notion of betterness,
– *anthropological*: need and want, decision and choice, motive, and action.

The intuitive concept of preference itself was said to ‘stand between the latter two groups of notions’. It is related to the axiological notion of betterness, but also to the anthropological notion of choice.

Considering the relationship between preference and betterness, von Wright distinguished two kinds of relation: *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* preference. He explains the difference with a nice example:

…a person says […] that he prefers claret to hock, because his doctor has told him, or he has found from experience that the first wine is better for his stomach or health in general. In this case a *judgement of betterness serves as a ground or reason* for a preference. I shall call preferences which hold this relationship to betterness *extrinsic*. It could, however, also be the case that a person prefers claret to hock, not because he thinks (opines) that the first wine is better for him, but simply because he likes the first better (more). Then his liking the one wine better is not a reason for his preference. …

*(von Wright 1963, p. 14)*

Simply stated, the difference is principally that *p* is preferred *extrinsically* to *q* if it is preferred *because* it is better in some explicit respect. If there is no such reason, the preference is intrinsic.