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# On the possibility of Paretian liberalism: a comment

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## Abstract

In 1981, the property of self-supporting preferences was shown to be a sufficient condition to circumvent Sen’s famous impossibility result on Paretian liberalism. A similar condition was proposed by Dougherty and Edward in a very recent issue of this journal. The present comment sheds light on the logical connection between these two findings.

**Keywords** Social choice · Individual rights exercise · The Paretian dilemma · A possibility result

Sen’s “Impossibility of a Paretian Liberal ” (1970) had, after its appearance, caused a multitude of diverse reactions. Both economists and philosophers proposed various attempts to circumvent Sen’s negative finding. Since his axiomatic setup comprises three conditions, some scholars suggested that the domain of individual preferences be restricted (see, e.g., Breyer (1977)). Sen (1976) himself proposed that the Pareto condition be questioned in particular circumstances. The majority of scholars, however, advocated a weakening of Sen’s liberal condition. Gibbard’s (1974) ideas were twofold. In one approach, he developed the idea of alienable rights; in a second line of research, he was looking at the structure of individual preferences themselves. So-called conditional preferences led to an impossibility without demanding the Pareto principle, and unconditional preferences could not avoid preference cycles on the aggregate level, once combined with Pareto. Following this line of research, Gaertner and Krüger (1981) introduced the concept of self-supporting preferences. Rights should be granted only if the privileged person herself supports them (within her preference ranking) in a “straightforward” manner, since these rights should be granted an absolute protection from all social interference. To have self-supporting preferences, an individual who has shown a strict preference for his or her personal feature  $x_i$ , let us say, over another personal feature  $y_i$  in a given situation has to fulfil the following requirement: as long as the basic collective features of society remain constant, he or she will not be permitted to reverse the preference for  $x_i$  over  $y_i$ , irrespective of changes that other individuals make concerning their own private

affairs. However, the individual is permitted to have trade-offs between his or her feature-alternatives and certain basic collective features. However, self-supporting preferences preclude that this trade-off be reversed if the features of others or non-basic collective features change. Comparing this notion with Gibbard's concept of unconditional preferences, it is very clear that self-supporting preferences require more. This is the "price" for achieving a possibility result under unrestricted domain and the weak Pareto principle (their Theorem 1).

The idea that individuals preserve their rankings over private features or attributes irrespective of changes in the attributes of others is also underlying the concept of "independence of irrelevant dimensions" in a very recent paper by Dougherty and Edward (2022) in this journal. The authors call their concept IID preferences and they describes these "as self-centered because their preferences are not conditioned on the actions of others, nor on any variation in the non-private attributes" (p. 435). This notion is very close to Gaertner and Krüger's concept of self-supporting preferences, though the latter allow for trade-offs between personal feature-alternatives and basic collective features, as stated above, so that their notion and the ensuing analytic result are more general. However, "basically", Gaertner and Krüger's result reappears in Theorem 1 and Corollary 1 of the paper by Dougherty and Edward. Their result may, therefore, be viewed as a special case of Gaertner and Krüger's Theorem 1, published 41 years ago.

One should mention that Dougherty and Edward consider two versions of liberalism. In  $L_1$ , exactly two individuals are each decisive over a single pair of social states, in  $L_2$ , each individual is decisive over any pair of social states that differ only in the agent's personal features. Clearly, their theorem and corollary apply to both of their versions of liberalism. The stronger or more demanding condition  $L_2$  is closer to Gaertner and Krüger's framework of liberal rights exercise.

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