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## Is Utilitarianism Bad for Women?

H. E. Baber

### Abstract

Philosophers and policy-makers concerned with the ethics, economics, and politics of development argue that the phenomenon of “adaptive preference” makes preference-utilitarian measures of well-being untenable. Poor women in the Global South, they suggest, adapt to deprivation and oppression and may come to prefer states of affairs that are not conducive to flourishing. This critique, however, assumes a questionable understanding of preference utilitarianism and, more fundamentally, of the concept of preference that figures in such accounts.

If well-being is understood as preference satisfaction, it is easy to see why poor women in the Global South are badly off: even if they do not desire more favorable conditions, they nevertheless prefer them, and that preference is not satisfied. Preferentism provides a rationale for improving economic conditions and dismantling the unjust institutions that prevent them from climbing higher on their preference rankings. Utilitarianism, therefore, insofar as utility is understood as preference satisfaction, is good for women.

**Keywords:** adaptive preference, utilitarianism, feminism, preference, preferentism, desire theory, rational choice, well-being, Nussbaum, Khader, capability

Philosophers and policy-makers concerned with the ethics, economics, and politics of development argue that the phenomenon of “adaptive preference” makes preference-utilitarian measures of well-being untenable. Poor women in the Global South, they suggest, adapt to deprivation and oppression and may come to prefer states of affairs that are not conducive to flourishing.

So, Serene Khader writes, “One problem with treating preference satisfaction as the end of development is that people can have preferences it seems morally questionable to fulfill.” She continues:

People’s wants can become deformed by bad circumstances. Taking preference satisfaction as the end of development implies that we have an obligation to fulfill people’s deformed preferences. This implication of

preference satisfaction theories of social distribution is deeply objectionable . . . and so we should be wary of utilitarian approaches. (Khader 2011, 43)

This critique assumes a questionable understanding of preference utilitarianism and, more fundamentally, of the concept of preference that figures in such accounts.

In Section 1 of this paper, I argue that it is a mistake to understand preferentism as “the desire theory of well-being”: preferentism is an account of betterness rather than well-being as such. Where an individual, *i*, prefers *x* to *y*, she is better off getting *x*. In section 2, I suggest that disadvantaged individuals reconciled to their lots in life may prefer conditions more conducive to flourishing even if they do not actively desire or pursue them. In Section 3, I note that rational choosers may be ignorant or misinformed about both empirical facts and “values” so that, as a consequence, their choices do not reveal their preferences. In Section 4, I suggest that while there are authentic cases of adaptive preference, it is not as common as many writers suggest and is likely not what drives women living in adverse circumstances to make choices that privileged observers construe as expressions of “deformed” or “inappropriately adaptive” preferences.

If well-being is understood as preference satisfaction, then it is easy to see why poor women in the Global South are badly off: even if they do not actively desire more favorable conditions, they nevertheless prefer them, and that preference is not satisfied. Preferentism provides a rationale for improving economic conditions and dismantling the unjust institutions that prevent them from climbing higher on their preference rankings. Utilitarianism, therefore, insofar as utility is understood as preference satisfaction, is good for women.

### **1. Preferentism Is Not the “Desire Theory”**

Writers are inclined to use the terms “preference” and “desire” interchangeably for elegant variation. This is, however, a grave error. First, for practical purposes, we need an account of *relative* well-being. Where resources are abundant, we should be able to explain why, though an individual would do well with either of two states of affairs, she might be better off with one rather than with the other. And where resources are scarce and individuals are badly off with all available options, as is the case for poor women in the Global South, we should be able to identify the least-worst of those options. While we have some intuitive notion of the relative “strength” of desires, our intuitions are unstable and provide little guidance when it comes to determining the relative betterness of various states of affairs, which preference rankings readily provide.

Secondly, while desire can be understood as a dispositional state, Nussbaum and other critics who cite what they take to be instances of “adaptive preference” in objections to the desire theory assume that desire is an occurrent state involving

yens, urges, and cravings which, if not satisfied, result in anger and felt frustration. So, Nussbaum writes:

[In] Andhra Pradesh I talked with women who were severely malnourished, and whose village had no reliable clean water supply. Before the arrival of a government consciousness-raising program, these women apparently had no feeling of anger or protest about their physical situation. . . . Now their level of discontent has gone way up: they protest to the local government, asking for clean water, for electricity, for a health visitor. . . . The consciousness-raising program has clearly challenged entrenched preferences and satisfactions, taking a normative approach based on an idea of good human functioning. (Nussbaum 2001, 69)

On the preferentist account proposed here, even while the women put up with adverse conditions, they *preferred* states of affairs that we should regard as more conducive to flourishing, that is, states they *would* have chosen given adequate information. Understood in this way, they were not damaged victims whose deformed preferences had to be dislodged through therapy or “consciousness-raising” but rational choosers who needed information about what options were available so that they could take action to satisfy their preferences.

A preferentist account of well-being is preferable to the version of the “desire theory” assumed by Nussbaum, where desire is understood as an occurrent state, because preferences can be ranked, because preferences are dispositional, and because the preferentist account can explain why, *ceteris paribus*, life-improvement is better than life-adjustment.

### 1.1. Preferences Are Ranked

Desire is a binary relation holding on an agent and a state of affairs or bundle of goods. Preference is a ternary relation. We do not simply prefer states of affairs or bundles of goods: we prefer them *to* other states of affairs or *to* other bundles of goods. If I prefer  $x$  to  $y$  and get  $x$  then my preference for  $x$  (over  $y$ ) is satisfied—even if I prefer  $w$  to  $x$  and  $v$  to  $w$  and . . .  $a$  to  $b$ , that is, even if  $x$  is low on my preference ranking, and even if I do not *desire*  $x$ .

The “desire theory” is an account of well-being according to which only those states of affairs that a person desires contribute to her well-being. Preferentism, however, is an account of *relative* well-being. Preferentism *ranks* states of affairs according to their relative betterness. On this account, where  $i$  prefers  $x$  to  $y$ , that is, where  $x$  is higher on  $i$ 's preference ranking than  $y$ ,  $i$  is better off getting  $x$  than she would be getting  $y$ . That is not to say that  $x$  contributes to her well-being as we should ordinarily understand it. It may be that  $x$  is low on  $i$ 's preference ranking and,

indeed, a state of affairs that she would *ceteris paribus* prefer to avoid—a condition in virtue of which we should say she is badly off. But *y* is still lower on her preference ranking and so, on the preferentist account, however bad *x* is, it is better for *i* than *y*. A woman may remain in an abusive marriage because she believes, with justification, that her only alternative is destitution and homelessness, and because she prefers abuse to destitution and homelessness. Remaining in that marriage does not, we should say, contribute to her well-being: she is badly off. Nevertheless, given her preference, she is better off than she would be sleeping rough and begging in the street.

Not every state of affairs is desired, but every state of affairs is preferred—to some state of affairs or other. And, unless we restrict consideration to a finite menu, preference rankings do not bottom out or top out so, on the preferentist account, neither does betterness or worseness. No matter how good things are, they could always be better, and no matter how bad they are, they could always be worse. Every state of affairs is preferred to some state or other. Since, to this extent, every state of affairs satisfies a preference, we cannot reasonably understand well-being as preference satisfaction: preferentism must be understood as an account of betterness, or *relative* well-being.

## 1.2. Preferences Are Dispositional

Preference is the disposition to choose. If, as a rational agent, *i* would choose *x* over *y* after due deliberation, given all relevant information, then *i* prefers *x* to *y*.<sup>1</sup> This is a rough-and-ready characterization. The aim here is just to note that preference is a disposition, in particular a disposition to choose given one's beliefs and other psychological states, rather than a feely psychological state with respect to which we have privileged access. An individual, therefore, may be ignorant or mistaken about her preferences. *i* may be unaware that she prefers *x* to *y* because the very idea of *x* has never occurred to her. *i* might prefer to study Sanskrit rather than Spanish, that is, she would choose to study Sanskrit if she were adequately informed, but chooses Spanish because she has never heard of Sanskrit.

Desire too may be understood as a dispositional state. But that is not the way in which Jon Elster, who introduced the term “adaptive preference” (paradigmatically illustrated by the fable of the Fox and the Grapes), understands it. Fox, when he realizes that the grapes he wants are out of reach, becomes convinced that they are sour and, therefore, undesirable. Later, when the grapes become available, he jumps for them. Elster's take is that Fox's desire for the grapes is “unstable”: extinguished when Fox believes that they are unattainable, since he no

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<sup>1</sup> Preference as it figures in the current account is to be understood as *informed* preference—as it must in any account of well-being as preference satisfaction.

longer *yearns* and or *feels frustration*, but reignited when he recognizes that he can, in fact, get them.<sup>2</sup>

On the current preferentist account, preference is a dispositional state, and Fox's preferences did not change since he was, from the outset, disposed to jump for the grapes should they become available. Fox on this account is a self-deceiver. Initially, he believed, falsely, that he would prefer other cibarious options to the grapes. Nevertheless, so long as the grapes were unattainable, Fox was doing as well as he could since he had successfully extinguished desire and so avoided fruitless yearning and felt frustration.

#### **Fox's Preference Ranking**

- Grapes + no felt frustration
- No grapes + no felt frustration
- No grapes + felt frustration

Fox would, however, have been better off getting the grapes even when he did not actively desire them since he preferred them to other edibles.

If desire is understood as an occurrent, phenomenal state, then we may prefer what we do not desire. Fox desired mice, fungus, carrion, and other fox fare (Jackson 2016) that was available; so long as the grapes were out of reach, he did not *desire* them. Like us, however, he preferred grapes to mice, fungus, and carrion. Even if an individual, *i*, desires *x* but does not desire *y*, it does not follow that *i* prefers *x* to *y*.

### **1.3. Life-Improvement and Life-Adjustment**

We can avoid frustration by life-adjustment or by life-improvement: by changing ourselves to suppress our desires, or by changing the conditions of our lives to satisfy our desires.

Fox avoided fruitless yearning through self-deception. Other rational choosers achieve serenity through what Elster calls "character planning": they intentionally extinguish desire in order to avoid felt frustration. Elster suggests that "character planning" is better than foxy self-deception. Individuals engaged in character-planning act as rational, autonomous agents; unintentional adaptation to unsatisfactory circumstances and self-deception undermine autonomy and self-determination. On the preferentist account, however, neither rationality nor autonomy nor self-determination is of any intrinsic worth. They are valuable only to

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<sup>2</sup> See Elster 1983. Elster's reading of the fable is not uncontroversial. Desire can be understood as a disposition and, read in this way, we should say that Fox desired the grapes all along.

the extent that they facilitate preference satisfaction, which alone is intrinsically valuable.

It is an empirical question whether deliberate character-planning is a more effective strategy for maximizing preference satisfaction than self-deception. There is, however, some reason to believe that unintentional adaptation is the better strategy, since it takes less effort than character-planning. *Ceteris paribus*, most of us prefer less work to more work and theft to honest toil, so we may be better off cultivating the habit of self-deception in order to avoid frustration in circumstances where we are cannot get what we want.

Whatever their respective merits, foxy self-deception and deliberate character-planning are both are life-adjustment strategies. Intuitively, all other things being equal, life-improvement is better than life-adjustment. And the preferentist account of relative well-being explains why.

As a dieter, I have suppressed my desire for crusty bread and stinky cheese. I prefer bread and cheese to veggies and tofu, but at the supermarket I head for the produce section. I have extinguished my yearning and, by habit, don't stop at the bakery section or the cheese cooler. My preferences, however, have not changed. *If* I could gorge on bread on cheese without gaining weight I would. Intuitively, I would be better off if I could have my cake and eat it than I am in virtue of having extinguished desire: if there were a treatment that fixed my metabolism so that I could indulge in cheese, or if the dairy industry could contrive a convincing low-calorie Stilton, I would be better off than I am now, having adjusted to greens and extinguished my habit of cheese-seeking.

Preferentism can explain why we are better off with life-improvement than with life-adjustment. Even though I don't yearn, I still prefer bread and cheese to veggies and tofu: all other things being equal, bread and cheese is what I would choose. But all other things are not equal: if I eat the foods I prefer, I gain weight, and that is something I cannot change. So, I am better off extinguishing desire: life-adjustment is better than fruitless yearning since it satisfies my preference for serenity over felt frustration. But it does not satisfy my preference for cheese, which persists even though my cravings have been extinguished. Life-improvement would be better: I would be better off avoiding frustration *and* getting cheese than I am just avoiding frustration.

If, however, well-being is the satisfaction of desire then extinguishing desire should be as good as satisfying it: either way, we avoid felt frustration. If the costs are the same, there is no reason to choose one over the other; and where desire-extinction is less costly, that is what we should choose. Moreover, if well-being is just desire-satisfaction then getting goods we do not desire, or states of affairs for which we do not yearn, does not contribute to well-being. This is what worries critics, and rightly so, about the desire theory. If impoverished women in the Global

South do not yearn for literacy, crave clean water, adequate food, and housing, or cry out for better health care then, on this account, the provision of these goods would not make them better off. And if providing these goods would not make them better off then there is no reason to invest scarce resources to make them available—much less to provoke dissatisfaction and demands for improved conditions.

Preferentism tells a different story. There are infinitely many possible states of affairs and, for any two,  $x$  and  $y$ , an individual either prefers  $x$  to  $y$ , or  $y$  to  $x$ , or is indifferent between them. The menus from which individuals can choose are, however, finite: innumerable states of affairs are unattainable, and every ordinary, finite being has innumerable preferences that cannot be satisfied. Rational choosers may practice foxy self-deception or engage in character-planning to suppress yearning and avoid felt frustration. Nevertheless, on the preferentist account, they would be better off attaining the states of affairs they prefer—those they *would* choose if attaining them were feasible.

## 2. Preference Beyond Feasibility

Rational choosers adopt a variety of strategies to cope with unsatisfiable preferences. Nevertheless, even where an individual does not feel frustration with the conditions of her life, it does not follow that she prefers this state of affairs to conditions that we should regard as more conducive to flourishing.

### 2.1. The Least-Worst Option

The literature on adaptive preferences rehearses stories of impoverished women in the Global South whose menus of feasible options are severely restricted, who settle for options that are low on their preference rankings because they believe, with justification, that they cannot do better. That is to say, they are rational.

Martha Nussbaum's subject Jayamma, a rational chooser who works at her local kiln hauling bricks for starvation wages because she has no viable alternatives, "does not waste mental energy" stewing over the injustice of her professional (or equally unsatisfactory domestic) arrangements. She would *prefer* a better job: she would jump at one if it were on offer, but believes that that option is not available. Being clever, like Fox, she settles for what she has reason to believe is her least-worst option:

#### **Jayamma's Preference Ranking**

Better job + no feelings of outrage or frustration

Current lousy job + no feeling of outrage or frustration

Current lousy job + feelings of outrage and frustration



Since getting a better job is, for all practical purposes, impossible, Jayamma is doing as well as she can.

Nussbaum, who imagines herself “giving voice” to impoverished, oppressed women, produces what she takes to be a transcript of Jayamma’s stream of consciousness: “Consider Jayamma,” she writes,

acquiescent in a discriminatory wage structure and a discriminatory system of family income sharing. When women were paid less for heavier work at the brick kiln and denied chances for promotion, Jayamma didn’t complain or protest. She knew that this was how things were and would be . . . she didn’t even waste mental energy getting upset, since these things couldn’t be changed . . . and she didn’t waste time yearning for another way. (Nussbaum 2000, 113)

This likely is the way in which Jayamma reasons because Jayamma is a rational, informed chooser. Her inner monologue is not, as Nussbaum suggests, a manifestation of deformed preferences. To assess her prospects, Jayamma considers the way things go for others who are similarly situated, assuming quite reasonably that that is likely the way they will go for her, and concludes that she hasn’t got a chance.

To determine how our lives are likely to go and, therefore, what policies are worth pursuing, we look at the lives of individuals who are demographically similar to us and similarly situated, assuming that our lives are likely to go in the way that theirs do. We look at the statistics and play the odds. And, as rational choosers we avoid taking on the costs and risks of pursuing outcomes that are, by that statistical standard, highly unlikely. That is Jayamma’s policy: she believes, with justification, that she cannot get a better job or more favorable domestic arrangements because that is the way things go for women who are similarly situated. She quite reasonably prefers to avoid felt frustration, and so makes the best of a raw deal—not because she prefers it to states of affairs that are more conducive to flourishing but because she believes, with justification, that it is the best she can do. She avoids felt frustration in circumstances where the state of affairs she prefers is not available and, like Fox, is doing as well as she can.

Nussbaum understands Jayamma’s policy differently. She suggests that “Jayamma seemed to lack not only the concept of herself as a person with rights that could be violated, but also the sense that what was happening to her was a wrong” (Nussbaum 2000, 113). This is highly speculative. Nussbaum has not engaged Jayamma or any of the other women whose lives she chronicles in any discussion about their concepts of personhood or what they believe their rights are.

She assumes that because Jayamma and other impoverished Indian women put up with occupational and domestic arrangements that more privileged individuals regard as unsatisfactory, their preferences are “deformed.”

In adverse circumstances, rational choosers whose options are few and poor prefer their least-worst options to alternatives that are worse still. Preferentists do not hold that we are obliged to satisfy this preference for least-worst options *instead of* preferences for states of affairs that are higher on their preference rankings, which are unattainable. We hold that additional options should be available to them so that they can achieve results that are higher on their preference rankings and do not have to settle for the least-worst.

### 3. Varieties of Ignorance and Misinformation

Sometimes we do not do as well as we can for ourselves because we believe falsely, but with justification, that we cannot do any better. Rational choosers making decisions under uncertainty are sometimes ignorant or misinformed, and so may be overly pessimistic.

#### 3.1. Factual Error

Vasanti, another one of the women whose lives Nussbaum chronicles, stayed for years in an abusive marriage because she believed falsely, but with justification, that it was her least-worst option. She, reasonably, preferred sticking with her abusive husband to begging in the street and sleeping rough, which she assumed was her only alternative.

#### **Vasanti’s Preference Ranking**

Home and basic necessities + no beatings

Home and basic necessities + occasional beatings

No home or basic necessities + no beatings

Vasanti did not have a “deformed preference” for abuse. All other things being equal, she would have preferred to avoid being beaten. But all things were not equal—or so she thought.

A rational chooser may prefer  $x$  to  $y$  but nevertheless choose  $y + z$  over  $x + w$  because she is more averse to  $w$  than she is to  $y$  and cannot get  $x$  without  $w$ . That is the situation Vasanti believed herself to be in. She was more averse to homelessness and destitution than she was to beatings and believed falsely, but with justification, that she would not have a roof over her head unless she knuckled

under to her abusive husband.<sup>3</sup> She chose a “mixed bundle of goods”, the bads along with the goods, because she believed that, on balance, it was the best she could do—her least-worst option.

We all choose from amongst the “mixed bundles of goods” we encounter in our lives and rarely pursue the outcomes that are highest on our preference rankings because the bundles we most prefer are almost never available. We compromise and make trade-offs to pursue the outcomes that are on balance best from amongst those that are feasible. I like both money and leisure. The bundle of goods highest on my preference ranking includes limitless wealth and complete idleness. But that bundle is not available, so I forgo the extra income I could earn by teaching summer school and winter intersession classes. I do not prefer less money to more money. All other things being equal, I would choose to have as much money as possible, but all other things are not equal: I can only get more money at the cost of more work. Since I am highly averse to teaching, I trade off income for non-market time—like Vasanti, who, given her reasonable assessment of her options, chose to trade off “bodily integrity” and “autonomy” for food, clothing, and shelter.

Vasanti was in fact mistaken about her prospects: contrary to custom, her family of origin took her back when she left her husband. Once she discovered that they would provide a home and basic necessities for her, that is what she chose—revealing that, all other things being equal, she preferred to avoid spousal abuse. She climbed higher on her preference ranking than she had believed possible: she got a roof over her head and basic necessities without beatings.

An individual prefers  $x$  to  $y$  only if she would choose  $x$  over  $y$  *given all relevant information*. Ideal choosers have perfect information; ordinary choosers, however rational, reflective, and duly deliberative, do not. A great many people are factually misinformed. Some believe that FGM promotes good hygiene or that it is required by the Koran; others believe that vaccines cause autism. Many others, like Vasanti, are mistaken about the consequences their actions will have: the future is always uncertain.

Individuals making life decisions under uncertainty are not like the ideal consumers of the economics literature who know what products are available and what they cost. Shoppers choosing breakfast cereals know exactly what products are

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<sup>3</sup> Some privileged observers might suggest that preference for the mixed bundle that includes abuse is itself a “deformed” preference, imagining that they would choose material deprivation over beatings and humiliation, or even death rather than dishonor. Others, including myself, and perhaps many more if they were being honest with themselves, would certainly prefer beating, humiliation, and dishonor: this preference is not peculiar to deprived women in the Global South, and it is not plausible to suggest that it is an “adaptive preference.”

available: the cereals are on the shelf for all to see. They know also that they will succeed in achieving their ends: they will get the product they select. When it comes to consumer behavior, it is reasonable to assume that choice reveals preference. When it comes to many more significant life decisions, it is not. These choices are decisions under uncertainty where an individual chooses to pursue a course of action in the interests of achieving a result that may or may not come about. Under such conditions, rational choosers, deliberating about which courses of action to pursue, consider not only their preferences but the probability that a given course of action will bring about the projected outcome. Since the ends we most prefer are usually the hardest to attain, we, as rational choosers, do not often choose courses of action aimed at bringing about states of affairs that are highest on our preference rankings.

Vasanti, as a rational chooser, stuck with an abusive husband because she knew that the odds that her family of origin would take her back were low and predicted that if she left him she would be destitute and homeless—not because she preferred her domestic arrangement to circumstances more conducive to flourishing. She was, quite reasonably, pessimistic but, happily, incorrect.

Optimistic middle-class observers, brought up to believe that they could “be anything” and achieve virtually any goal by dint of commitment, persistence, and hard work are baffled by the pessimism of individuals in less favorable circumstances. Disadvantaged individuals in traditional societies know better: they recognize that they cannot “be anything” and that commitment, persistence, and hard work are unlikely to pay off. Where poverty is intergenerational, social roles are locked in by custom, and occupational choices are few, they have good reason to believe that social, economic, and political arrangements are as immutable as the laws of nature. They are pessimistic, cynical, and fatalistic because, given the evidence available to them, they quite reasonably believe that they can no more make significant changes in their social or economic conditions than they can make changes in the weather or the tides.

Their preferences are not deformed; rather, they believe, with good reason, that their preferences cannot, realistically, be satisfied and make their choices accordingly. Women are beaten, health care and sanitation are poor, and institutions are ineffective and corrupt: that is the way of the world they occupy. They choose the least-worst options not because they prefer them but because they believe, with justification, that that is likely the best they can do.

### **3.2. Normative Ignorance**

Many individuals in affluent countries, as well as the Global South, are unaware of alternative norms, values, and moral codes. And, like factual error, ignorance of alternative norms may lead individuals to make choices that do not

reflect their preferences. All other things being equal, *i* might prefer *x* to *y*. But all other things may not equal. *i* may endorse a code of conduct that prescribes choosing *y* over *x* and choose to act in accordance with that code because she believes that it is the right thing to do. She may be mistaken. But even if she is, that is not to say that her preferences are deformed. It may be that, as Lucky Jim put it, that she does not “know what is possible.”

In many traditional societies where female subordination is the norm and wife-beating is common, a remarkable number of women apparently believe that if a woman leaves the house without her husband’s permission, resists his sexual advances, or even “cooks bad food,” she should be beaten. According to a recent global survey:

In 29 countries . . . one-third or more of men say that it can be acceptable for a husband to “beat his wife.” [And] . . . in 19 countries, one-third or more of women agree. . . . In Rwanda, 96 percent of women say the practice can be justified, according to the World Values Survey. (Aizenman 2015)

These remarks have to be assessed with care because, arguably, in many cases they are not expressions of “values” or moral commitments but rather reports of what the local code of conduct allows or mandates. In the surveys cited, subjects were asked: “Sometimes a husband is annoyed or angered by things which his wife does. In your opinion, is a husband justified in hitting or beating his wife in the following situations?” and presented with a number of scenarios. Even with the qualification that respondents were to give their “opinions” on this matter, the question was ambiguous. It might not have been clear to subjects whether they were being asked a normative question about the moral acceptability of a practice or an empirical question about a feature of their local code of conduct. Unless individuals are aware of alternative codes of conduct and practices, they are not likely to make that distinction at all. Unsophisticated individuals who have no conception of ethical alternatives may read any questions about what practices are morally acceptable or unacceptable as factual questions about what their local codes of conduct permit or prohibit.

The study notes further that

there’s evidence that women’s attitudes are changing dramatically in some places. In Nigeria, 44 percent of women said it was all right for a husband to beat his wife in 2003, but the figure dropped to 21 percent in 2013, according to the World Bank. In Benin, the drop was from 39 percent to 10 percent over a similar period. And in Haiti, the decline was from 11 percent to 3 percent. (Aizenman 2015)

These results, authors of the report remark, are puzzling: why the change? As the study notes, the association with urban residence does not make a difference in acceptance of wife-beating across cultures. Neither does religion: Muslim women were significantly less likely to justify wife-beating than Catholic respondents in Malawi, while the relationship was in the opposite direction in Mali and Benin. Most surprising, in many of the countries studied, women working for pay were either more or as likely to justify wife-beating than non-working women. According to studies, it is rather “secondary or higher education and household wealth . . . [that] emerged as the most significant and consistent predictors of non-acceptance of wife-beating” (Rani, Bonu, and Diop-Sidibé 2004, 133).

Arguably, the results of the studies suggest that many women who responded that wife-beating was acceptable were not distinguishing the normative question from the factual one, and were not expressing a preference for being beaten if they should violate the local code of conduct but rather reporting on the conditions under which wife-beating was justified according to that code. Education and wealth increase awareness of the way things are outside of the local community. Women with education and access to media discover that people live in a variety of different ways and have different conceptions of correct behavior. Educated, informed women recognize that there may be a difference between what their local code of conduct permits and how things *should* be, and may conclude, as a consequence, that wife-beating, even if it is acceptable in their local communities, is *not* morally permissible.

There may be women who, given all relevant information about alternative social norms and moral codes as well as factual matters, prefer to live according to a code of conduct that mandates female subordination and condones corporal punishment for women who do not comply. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that many of the women surveyed who held that wife-beating was acceptable were not adequately informed since the provision of further information and about alternative ways of life and codes of conduct made a striking difference.

#### **4. Changing Preferences?**

Adaptive preference happens but is not nearly as common as critics of preference utilitarianism imagine. It is unlikely that poor women in the Global South acquired a taste for deprivation and came to prefer the adverse circumstances of their lives to conditions more conducive to flourishing or that their preferences changed after “consciousness-raising” and other therapeutic interventions.

Tastes change. And sometimes people make different choices at different times because their preferences have changed. Choice, however, does not always reveal preference. *i* may choose *x* over *y* even though she *prefers* *y* because she

believes that *y* is not available, because she doesn't know what *y* is like, or because the very thought of *y* has never occurred to her. And *i* may prefer *y* to *x* even if she does not desire *y*.

The women whose stories are rehearsed in the literature on adaptive preference do not desire better conditions: they do not crave or yearn for improvement. But this is not to say that they desire poverty and oppression. Not desiring *x* does not mean desiring *not-x*. And, more to the point, it does not follow that they prefer the conditions of their lives to what we should regard as conditions more conducive to flourishing. On the account proposed here, the preferences of women in Andhra Pradesh did not change after "consciousness-raising." Rather, they learnt what options were available, concluded that improvement was feasible, and decided that it was worthwhile to agitate for better conditions. Sometimes preferences change; sometimes they don't.

#### 4.1. Stockholm: When Preferences Change

During a 1973 bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden, several bank employees who were held hostage in the bank vault by career criminal Jan-Erik Olsson and a confederate became emotionally attached to their captors, rejected assistance from government officials, and even defended their captors after they had been freed. If, as it seems reasonable to assume, the hostages were ordinary law-abiding Swedish citizens who, prior to the robbery, had disapproved of criminal activity and wanted to see criminals punished, their preferences changed as a consequence of their experience.

In a 2009 interview . . . Kristin Ehnmark, [one of the hostages,] explained: "It's some kind of context you get into when all your values, the morals you have, change in some way." . . . In one phone call from the bank's vault to the country's prime minister Olof Palme, Ehnmark begged to be allowed to leave the bank with the kidnappers. One of Olsson's demands had been the delivery of a getaway car in which he planned to escape with the hostages. (Wescott 2013)

And after Olsson and his confederate, Clark Olofsson, were captured, Ehnmark and Olofsson met several times and their families became friends. Unlike Fox, who jumped for the grapes once they were in reach, or the alleged victims of adaptive preference (as described by Martha Nussbaum and other writers), who took advantage of opportunities to better themselves once they became available, the Stockholm hostages did not jump at the chance to escape. Their preferences had changed.

Stockholm syndrome is rare (Wescott 2013). And so, arguably, is adaptive preference among deprived women in the Global South. Indeed, the stories Martha Nussbaum and other writers tell to illustrate the phenomenon show that their subjects' preferences were neither inappropriately adaptive nor "deformed": when options that were more conducive to "flourishing" were available and they were convinced that these options were within reach, they jumped for them—unlike the Stockholm hostages.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, the women of Andhra Pradesh didn't protest about their physical situation—later they did. Initially the Stockholm hostages didn't fraternize with bank robbers—later they did. The Stockholm hostages' preferences changed. Before being held hostage, it seems highly likely that, as bank employees, they disapproved of bank robbery and if asked, would have said: "We really don't like bank-robbers." Afterwards, as one put it, "your values, the morals you have, change." Nussbaum doesn't report any such change of heart on the part of her subjects.

#### **4.2. Andhra Pradesh: When Women Get What They Wanted All Along**

It is possible that the women of Andhra Pradesh initially valued malnutrition, preferred dirty water to clean water, were averse to the provision of electricity and the services of a health visitor, but changed their minds after their "entrenched preferences" were dislodged by "consciousness-raising." Nothing in Nussbaum's story suggests that this was the case. It is unlikely that if they had been asked what they wanted before "consciousness-raising," they would have said, "We don't like clean water, we enjoy our malnutrition, we don't want health visitors poking around, and you can take your electricity and shove it." And it is unlikely that after "consciousness-raising" they would have reported that their values or morals had changed.<sup>5</sup>

It is easy to explain why they didn't initially protest their poor conditions even though they didn't prefer them to conditions more conducive to flourishing: they were rational choosers with inadequate information who believed in induction.

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<sup>4</sup> They may not jump immediately because they are, quite reasonably, pessimistic and skeptical about whether proposed schemes for life-improvement are feasible. They believe in induction: things have always been lousy and are likely to stay lousy. Compare working class Americans clamoring for grunt work in coal mines and smokestack industries. It seems unlikely that they prefer these jobs to work in green energy projects, or that they prefer polluted rivers and denuded landscapes to woods and streams where they can hike, fish, and hunt. Rather, they are skeptical about whether alternative arrangements are feasible.

<sup>5</sup> I assume also, as it seems Martha Nussbaum does not, that they are perfectly capable of understanding, in their own language, what "values" and "morals" are.



“This is the way things always have been around here, and nothing anyone has ever done has made a difference, so it seems likely that things will always be this way and nothing that we can do will make any difference. No point in getting upset about it.” In adverse circumstances, where individuals believe, with justification, that conditions more conducive to “flourishing” are not available, that satisfying preferences higher on their preference rankings is not feasible, they quite reasonably avoid striving after the wind.

Many individuals living in adverse circumstances acquiesce and “become complicit in perpetuating their own deprivation” (Khader 2011, 5): a fact which cries out for explanation. According to the orthodox view, they acquiesce because they have “internalized limiting views” and prefer oppression and deprivation to conditions more conducive to flourishing. Given this explanation, only a perfectionist account—according to which certain states of affairs are objectively conducive to “flourishing,” whether people prefer them or not—can motivate humanitarian intervention and justify programs intended to promote social justice.

I have proposed an alternative and, I believe, more plausible explanation. Deprived individuals, including the women in the Global South whose plight Nussbaum, Khader, and others rightly deplore, want better lives and prefer conditions more conducive to flourishing but do not know what it would take to make things better and, in any case, do not believe that improvement is feasible. Humanitarian intervention and programs aimed at promoting social justice are required, in the interest of fairness, to see to it that their preferences are satisfied.

Preferentists agree with Nussbaum and other critics of the “desire theory” that impoverished women in the Global South would be better off achieving states of affairs that were more conducive to flourishing, since there is reason to believe that even though they do not *yearn* for those states or *feel* frustration, they prefer them.

## 5. Preference, Desire, and Distributive Justice

Preferentism is an account of relative well-being: it does not, by itself, provide a program for the allocation of scarce resources to determine who should be better off, by how much, or at whose expense. Neither does Nussbaum’s perfectionist account. Nussbaum provides a list of “central capabilities for flourishing” generally agreed to be good things, but her account is not a program allocating scarce resources to secure these benefits. The List only “gives the basis for determining a decent social minimum” (Nussbaum 2000, 74). It provides no guidance about how goods should be distributed in circumstances where extreme scarcity or conflict makes that impossible or how excess goods should be allocated when everyone has what they need for a minimally decent life. It is not even clear what the items on the List come to for practical purposes.

The Nussbaum's List includes "Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life at a normal length," which is surely a good thing, but the List provides no guidance for making hard choices about who gets to live or for how long. Living in an affluent country with access to advanced medical technology, I regard a life of 85 years as a human life of a normal length. By historical standards, however, that is an abnormally long lifespan. Should scarce resources be deployed to keep citizens of affluent countries alive and healthy into extreme old age or should we sacrifice years of our lives to provide the resources to enable individuals in poor countries to be alive and healthy longer—or to provide them with opportunities for "play. being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities" (Nussbaum 2000, 79)?

Again, "Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature," another item on Nussbaum's List, is also surely a good thing. Urban residents in affluent countries enjoy their pets, houseplants, and nature hikes. Individuals who make their living farming and raising livestock, however, cannot afford to tolerate predators, including members of endangered species, that destroy their crops, attack their stock, and threaten their livelihood. And farmers engaged in slash and burn agriculture cannot afford to "respect . . . the world of nature." There are conflicts of interest that require trade-offs and compromise. Nature lovers want national parks; ranchers want grazing land. Even if we agree that being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals and the environment is a central capability for human flourishing (itself controversial), it is not clear how we should adjudicate conflicts of interest in circumstances where resources are scarce and trade-offs (prohibited by Nussbaum) have to be made.

Preferentists agree with perfectionists that the women in the Global South who Nussbaum, Khader, Sen, and others suggest suffer from adaptive preference are much worse off than most citizens of affluent countries. A preferentist may adopt further principles for the fair distribution of goods and for measuring social welfare, and conclude that the distribution of goods is unfair, that the women whose stories Nussbaum tells are suffering from the grossest injustice, and that we are morally obliged to work for change.<sup>6</sup> Like perfectionism and unlike the "desire theory," preferentism makes it possible to "conduct a radical critique of unjust institutions" (Nussbaum 2000, 116). The difference is that whereas Nussbaum and others hold that Jayamma, Vasanti, and the rest are badly off because they do not

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<sup>6</sup> They may, for example, adopt the Max-Min principle which measures the social welfare of a society on the basis of the welfare of the least well-off individual member. Or, insofar as they are concerned with international development, may adopt the welfare function proposed by Sen according to which the average per capita income of a measured group, such as a nation, is multiplied with  $(1 - G)$  where  $G$  is the Gini index, a relative inequality measure.

prefer objectively valuable states of affairs and so do not pursue them, I have argued that they prefer conditions more conducive to flourishing and are badly off because their preferences are not satisfied.

This is not a distinction without a difference. The claim that poor women in the Global South suffer from “inappropriately adaptive preferences” is patronizing and insulting. It suggests that because of oppression and material deprivation they are psychologically damaged—that they have deformed preferences and need encouragement, consciousness-raising, and participation in discussion groups facilitated by culturally sensitive aid workers to reform their preferences and set them straight.<sup>7</sup>

Currently there is an emerging consensus that cash transfers and the provision of “public goods” are the most cost-effective ways to alleviate poverty and improve quality of life.<sup>8</sup> In-kind donations are expensive and distort local economies; microcredit is inefficient and ineffective (Banerjee et al. 2014); and the consciousness-raising and empowerment programs attached to other forms of aid are wasteful as well as humiliating. Poverty is the lack of money and the solution is, precisely, money.<sup>9</sup> We who, by pure dumb luck, have money do not have superior

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<sup>7</sup> If I may editorialize in a footnote: I am not one of the poor women in the Global South whose stories Nussbaum et al. tell, but my life has been tough. I acquiesced and compromised, and later struggled and fought to get the life I wanted and, more importantly, to avoid a life I would have found intolerable. I am outraged by the privileged promoters of “consciousness-raising” who suggest that we—I, and the women in the Global South who, like myself, are constrained by external circumstances—have “deformed preferences” and need to get our heads straight. This is the voice of privilege: of well-meaning reformers who have never themselves felt the pinch and imagine that the fault is not, or not only, in our stars but in ourselves—who imagine that we need some form of therapy to improve our self-esteem and fix our “deformed” preferences, and believe that they have superior wisdom to impart to us. Don’t make me your anthropological specimen, among those impoverished women in the Global South whom you pride yourselves on treating with the greatest cultural sensitivity, as one of those benighted proles who “cling to guns and religion.” Don’t give me your involvement, which I do not need, or your company, which I do not want, or your sympathetic retelling of what you take to be my story, which you do not understand.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Blattman and Niehaus 2014. See also Banerjee and Duflo 2011 for a comprehensive account, and the website associated with their book at <http://www.pooreconomics.com/about-book>.

<sup>9</sup> GiveDirectly is a highly efficient program that sends money to people living in extreme poverty. To donate go to <https://www.givedirectly.org/>.

wisdom. Poor women in the Global South do not need our encouragement or tutelage, our “consciousness-raising” or “empowerment” therapies, or our help in making “wise decisions.” They just need money, the permanent possibility of preference satisfaction, and public goods—decent roads, reliable electricity, adequate policing and the like—to enable them to use their resources effectively.

Preference utilitarianism, I have argued, is good for women. Preferentism provides an account of utility as relative well-being according to which impoverished women in the Global South are very much worse off than affluent individuals in the Global North—not because they suffer from “deformed” or “inappropriately adaptive” preferences but because they are harmed by deformed social, economic, and political arrangements that prevent them from attaining goods that are higher on their preference rankings. That, intuitively, is unfair. Preferentism, while it does not provide an account of fairness, is a starting point for formulating such an account, and for the discussion of how unjust institutions and unfair social arrangements can be dismantled in order to provide people with the widest possible range of options for preference satisfaction so that utility may abound.

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