

Adaptive Preference

Martha Nussbaum argues that *preference welfarism*, the doctrine that a person's good consists in the satisfaction of her informed desires, fails to explain our intuitions in cases of "adaptive preference," where the preferences of individuals in deprived circumstances are formed in response to their restricted options. Intuitively, it is better for individuals to get what they want than to adjust their wants to be satisfied by what they can get. Preference welfarism however cannot mark this difference as morally significant.

I argue, first, that given a reasonable account of preference as it figures in utilitarian accounts, cases of the sort she describes are not examples of adaptive preference and do not undermine the preference utilitarian's account of what is good for people. The problem is not, as Nussbaum suggests, that the preferences of deprived individuals have been "distorted" but rather that they are not satisfied.

Subjective Welfarism

As *welfarists*, utilitarians are committed to the doctrine that "the correct way to assess or assign value to states of affairs...[is] welfare, satisfaction, or people getting what they prefer." Preference utilitarians hold that preference satisfaction alone is what matters, thus Harsanyi:

[P]reference utilitarianism is the only form of utilitarianism consistent with the important philosophical principle of *preference autonomy* ... the principle that, in deciding what is good and what is bad for a given individual, the ultimate criterion can only be his own wants and his own preferences.¹

Harsanyi notes that for the principle of preference autonomy to yield plausible results the utilitarian must idealize the notion of preference: since this notion has work to do in articulating our concepts of rational choice and the social good, it cannot be understood crudely in terms of either drives or actual choices.² Nevertheless, neither the content nor the origin of preferences matter, but only that they are satisfied: welfare consists in preference satisfaction. Welfare on this account is “subjective”: there is no objective standard for evaluating preferences and so what constitutes our welfare is strictly *de gustibus*.(Harsanyi 1982)

Our preferences, however, are influenced by our perceived options and life circumstances. The proverbial fox rejects the grapes as sour once he sees that they are out of reach. Similarly, in deprived circumstances individuals scale down their aspirations. Critics suggest that this phenomenon of “adaptive preference” is a hard case for preference utilitarianism thus, reflecting on the plight of poor women in developing countries, Martha Nussbaum notes:

‘Quiet acceptance of deprivation and bad fate affects the scale of dissatisfaction generated, and the utilitarian calculus gives sanctity to that distortion’ ... this makes utility quite inadequate as a basis of social choice.³

Satisfying desires distorted by deprivation, she suggests, does not contribute to the social good and, indeed consciousness-raising to induce dissatisfaction is in order, particularly where such desires are a consequence of individuals’ response to unfair practices.⁴

Jayamma

Nussbaum confuses the absence of occurrent frustration with preference satisfaction. Neither the proverbial story of the fox and the grapes nor the true stories of women in developing countries are, on the most plausible interpretation, cases of adaptive preference.

Preference is not an occurrent, qualitative state: a person may prefer a state of affairs without ever experiencing an occurrent craving and often it is only when people get what they prefer that they realize that it was what they “wanted all along.” While people typically prefer to avoid unpleasant qualitative states associated with the thwarting of desires, we cannot assume that agents who cease to feel frustration have ceased to have the desires that are thwarted.

The fox wants grapes but knows that they are inaccessible. He also prefers serenity to felt frustration.⁵ Given that he cannot get the grapes, the best he can do is to extinguish frustration—either by modifying his preferences through, what Jon Elster calls, “character planning,” by practicing self-deception to persuade himself that he does not want the grapes, or by avoiding further rumination on the grape problem.⁶

Elster, who takes the story of the fox to be a paradigm case of adaptive preference remarks that it is characteristic of such cases that the preferences individuals adopt in response to their circumstances are “unstable” – so that if the grapes should come within reach, the fox would jump at them.

Give any reasonable dispositional account of preference, however such an “unstable” preference is no preference at all. If the fox is disposed to jump at the grapes as

soon as they become available, then we should say that he has wanted them all along even if he has succeeded in extinguishing feelings of frustration and persuading himself that he does not in fact want them: his problem is not adaptive preference but self-deception. What constitute his preference are not occurrent feelings but behavioral dispositions, in particular those determining what he would choose if given the opportunity. The inaccessibility of the grapes has not changed his preferences.

Arguably there is no compelling reason to believe that poverty, unfair treatment and bad working conditions have affected the preferences of the poor women whose stories Nussbaum tells either.

[C]onsider Jayamma... 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.⁷

“Jayamma,” Nussbaum speculates, “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.”⁸

Nussbaum has not however produced any evidence to suggest that Jayamma would reject a raise in salary if one were offered or that she would forgo a promotion in order to continue in her current position (hauling bricks). If Jayamma would, as seems

likely, jump at a raise in salary and promotion if they were offered then we should say that, although she does not experience feelings of frustration or moral outrage, this is what she most prefers and that as things stand this preference is not satisfied.⁹

Extinguishing felt frustration does not mean extinguishing preference. If this is correct then Jayamma's story, like the fable of the fox, is not a case of adaptive preference. The preference utilitarian therefore has no difficulty in explaining what is wrong with institutions that support low wages, discriminatory practices and poor working conditions for Jayamma and others like her. Because of such institutions and practices Jayamma cannot get what she most prefers, the state she would choose if it were available and which, on the preference utilitarian account, is therefore what is best for her.

The moral of Jayamma's story: the absence of felt frustration is not the same thing as desire satisfaction.

Vasanti

While preferring a thing is not a matter of the presence, or absence, of feely psychological states it would nevertheless not be quite right to say that choosing x , or voluntarily doing an action, a , with the intention of bringing about x , is tantamount preferring it. First, states of affairs are neither baldly preferred nor baldly rejected by agents -- they are ranked. A person may prefer x to y and y to z but be perfectly happy to get any one of them even if neither y nor z could be understood simply as "what he wants." Secondly, agents rank bundles rather than isolated goods so an agent may choose y over x even though *ceteris paribus* he would prefer x , because x has concomitants that

he wants to avoid. Finally, when rational agents choose which policies of action to pursue they consider not only the utility of the desired outcomes, but the probability of success in achieving them and also the risks and opportunity costs of pursuing their most preferred goals. An agent may pursue y , a sure thing, in preference to x , which he would prefer all other things being equal, because the odds of his getting x are low.

Consider the case of Vasanti who, Nussbaum suggests, stayed in an abusive marriage because of “desire-deformation” induced by intimidation, contempt and neglect.

Vasanti stayed for years in an abusive marriage...Like many women, she seems to have thought that abuse was painful and bad, but, still, a part of women’s lot...The idea that it was a violation of rights...and that *she herself* had rights that were being violated by his conduct -- she did not have these ideas at that time, and many, many women all over the world still do not have them. My Universalist approach seems to entail that there is something wrong with the preference (if this is what we should call it) to put up with abuse.¹⁰

Nussbaum’s construal of Vasanti’s motivation is speculative. If however speculation is in order we might, with equal justification understand Vasanti’s decision as the result of a utility calculation given her assessment of her options and the probabilities of various outcomes. Vasanti recognizes that, given her circumstances, staying in an abusive marriage is her best bet if she wants to have a home and basic necessities: even if she would rather avoid getting beaten, she is prepared to take on that cost in order to avoid her least preferred outcome--homelessness and destitution.

Vasanti's Utility Function

Home and basic necessities + no beatings	>>	3
Home and basic necessities + occasional beatings	>>	2
No home + begging in the street + no beatings	>>	1

Vasanti does not have a preference for abuse: she prefers having a home and being beaten to not having a home and not being beaten because she is more averse to homeless and destitution than to abuse.

Unless there is more to the story than Nussbaum reveals there does not seem to be any reason to assume that Vasanti was in a “slumberous state induced by years of contempt and neglect.” All the evidence presented suggests that she was behaving prudently. Vasanti preferred a bundle of goods that included being beaten up to one that did not include being beaten up. It does not however follow that she preferred being beaten to not being beaten or that she failed to recognize that it violated her rights, or that she suffered from “desire-deformation.”

The moral of Vasanti's story: preferring a bundle that includes x to one that includes y is not the same thing as preferring x to y.

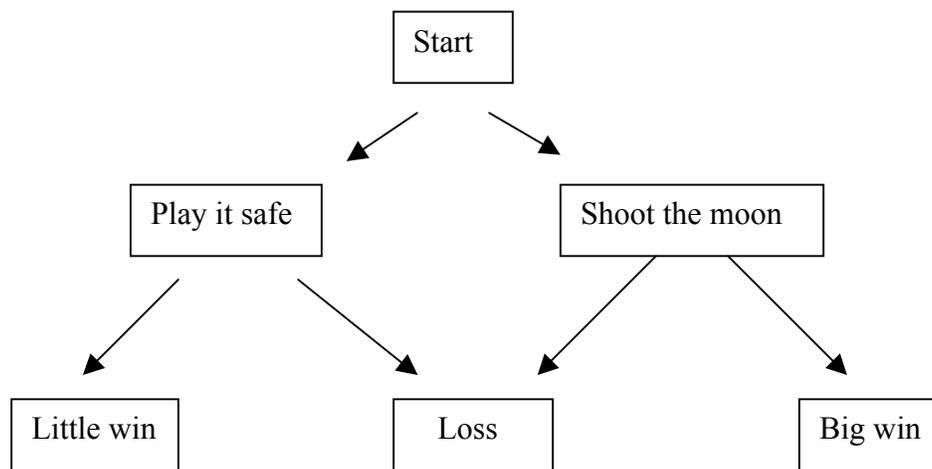
Saida

Neither Jayamma's story nor Vasanti's is a hard cases for subjective welfarism since there is no reason to read either as a case of adaptive preference. Jayamma knew she had no viable options. Vasanti thought she had no acceptable alternative to sticking

with her abusive husband. Making the best of a raw deal when no other alternatives are available is not the same as preferring it.

Moreover, even where an individual chooses a given policy of action over others that appear to be available, it does not follow that this choice represents her *ceteris paribus* preference. Even where a person enjoys a better than nil chance of getting her most preferred outcome, x , she may reasonably pursue a less preferred outcome, y , because the likelihood of success in getting y is higher than the probability of getting x , and because she knows that if she pursues x and fails she diminishes her chances of getting y and risks getting z , her least preferred outcome. This is the structure of the game of Hearts. Few players “shoot the moon” -- go for a big win -- not only because success is unlikely but because going for the big win substantially diminishes their chances of getting a little win and puts them at risk of losing outright.

The Game of Hearts



(1) The probability of getting a little win by playing it safe is higher than the probability of getting a big win by shooting the moon.

(2) The probability of getting a loss if you shoot the moon is higher than the probability of getting a loss if you play it safe.

Often people play it safe, aiming for a less preferred outcome rather than shooting the moon because of the low probability they assign, whether rightly or wrongly, to achieving their most preferred outcomes, and the opportunity costs of actively pursuing the goal they most prefer. This was Saida's policy.

In a recent interview, a group of traditional Afghan women held that formal education was a waste for girls.

Like the others, Saida, 27, received no formal education...Saida says her eldest daughter Nahid, 12, is getting ready for her betrothal to a 26-year-old farmer and does not have much time to spare for morning instruction... Saida teaches her girls the really important things--how to cook, sew and soothe a husband's ego. "Teaching my daughters how to make their husbands comfortable is the most important thing," she says, "because if a husband is not comfortable, then the woman's life is hell."¹¹

This is a rational decision given her assessment of the options girls in Afghanistan have and the probability of success in achieving various goals. It is unlikely that any lower-class Afghan girl, or boy, will become a teacher, doctor or engineer. Statistically, the overwhelming likelihood is that a girl will eventually marry and be totally dependent on her husband's good will for financial support and a decent life. So, in the manner of American mothers who, 30 years ago advised their daughters to forgo "unrealistic" career goals that might hinder them in the marriage market, Afghan mothers are "being

realistic.” Such “realism” is not a manifestation of low self-esteem or adaptive preference — it is a matter of rationally playing the odds.¹²

Saida thinks that making a husband comfortable is the most important thing because she believes that the only realistic alternative her daughters have is *failing* to make their husbands comfortable and suffering the consequences. It does not follow that she thinks that marriage at age 12 and domestic servitude is preferable to education and a career. Rather she recognizes that it is highly unlikely that her daughters will be able to achieve any degree of financial independence or live lives significantly different from her own. She calculates that the risk of shooting the moon is unwarranted.

The moral of Saida’s story: rational choosers do not just consider the desirability of outcomes; they also calculate the probability of achieving them and the opportunity costs of trying for them. Adopting a policy of action intended to get x rather than one intended to get y is not the same thing as preferring x to y.

Rational Choice

Nussbaum cites a range of cases in which women voluntarily remain in abusive marriages, work at bad jobs, put up with poor living conditions or otherwise engage in behavior that she regards as undignified or demeaning. She does not however provide any compelling reason to read these stories as cases in which women have come to *prefer* the conditions they tolerate to what she, or we, should regard as better options. Poor women in developing countries do not have these options.

Poor, unskilled women put up with discriminatory treatment at work because they know that regulations forbidding such practices and protecting workers who protest are

never taken seriously and that they can be easily replaced. They put up with abusive husbands because they prefer having basic necessities, even at the cost of getting beaten up, to being homeless and destitute. Some may indeed be overly pessimistic about their prospects and only learn, from seeing the benefits that come from the establishment women's co-ops or micro-credit schemes that efforts to improve their lot could pay off. Their pessimism, however, is the consequence of inadequate information and factual error rather than distorted preference: there is nothing in the anecdotal material Nussbaum provides to favor one reading over the other. Moreover, maximum charity suggests we regard these women as pessimistic but rational choosers who may adopt more proactive policies given additional information.

Nussbaum also ignores the extent to which feedback effects lock in poverty and bad treatment. Jayamma knows that isolated protests do no good. So long as her co-workers put up with low wages and poor working conditions she knows her best option is to put up with adverse conditions and unfair treatment--because she knows her fellow workers know that that is their best option too given that they know that they are all in the same boat. And their employer knows that they know. The phenomenon is familiar: even where everyone gets what she most prefers given the choices of others, and to that extent what is best for them in the circumstances, everyone might prefer the outcome of everyone's having chosen differently. Second-guessing and feedback effects lock in suboptimal equilibria. And poor women in developing nations are especially vulnerable to being caught in such vicious circles because they are less able to assume risk than individuals who have economic cushions or fallback positions.

There are indeed hard cases for preference utilitarianism of the sort Nussbaum has in mind, for the most part fictional cases where individuals are manipulated through brainwashing, psychosurgery or genetic engineering and their preferences are, by hypothesis, changed. Nussbaum has not however shown that the cases she cites are instances of adaptive preference or that they are hard cases for preference utilitarianism.

The preference utilitarian does not claim that what is best for a person *tout court* is his getting what he prefers from amongst available options but that it is the best he can do for himself from amongst available options.¹³ Where an individual prefers options that are not on offer she holds that it would be better for him if they were. This is what motivates the preference utilitarian's critique of unjust institutions that restrict opportunities for desire satisfaction and support for efforts to provide needy individuals with material assistance, rather than rights, self-esteem, dignity or other cheap goods.

¹ Harsanyi, J. C. (1982). Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior. Utilitarianism and Beyond. A. Sen and B. Williams. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 39-62.

² "In actual fact, there is no difficulty in maintaining this distinction even without an appeal to any other standard than an individual's own personal preferences. All we have to do is distinguish between a person's manifest preferences and his true preferences. His manifest preferences are his actual preferences as manifested by his observed behavior, including preferences possibly based on erroneous factual beliefs, or on careless logical

analysis, or on strong emotions that at the moment greatly hinder rational choice. In contrast, a person's true preferences are the preferences he *would* have if he had all the relevant factual information, always reasoned with the greatest possible care and were in a state of mind most conducive to rational choice...social utility must be denied in terms of people's true preferences rather than in terms of their manifest preferences" Ibid., p. 55

³Nussbaum cites Sen here. Ibid, p. 139

⁴ Nussbaum, M. (2001). Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options. *Economics and Philosophy*, 17, 67-88. "Embraced as a normative position subjective welfarism makes it impossible to conduct a radical critique of unjust institutions."

⁵ Fox's Utility Function

Grapes + no felt frustration	>>	3
No grapes + no felt frustration	>>	2
No grapes + felt frustration	>>	1

⁶ Vide Elster, J. (1983). *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.] For a contemporary case, consider official US statements regarding the importance of capturing bin Laden — currently, in light of his apparent escape, assigned a significantly lower priority than initially.

⁷ [Nussbaum, 2000 #4], p. 113

⁸ Ibid, p. 113

⁹ Like the fox, Jayamma settles for second best:

Jayamma's Utility Function

Better job + no feelings of outrage or frustration	>>	3
Current lousy job + no feelings of outrage or frustration	>>	2
Current lousy job + feelings of outrage and frustration	>>	1

¹⁰ Nussbaum, M. (2001). "Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options." Economics and Philosophy 17: 67-88.

¹¹ Richard Lacayo. "About Face for Afghan Women" *Time Magazine* Thursday, January 17, 2002

¹² Vasanti it seems was also playing the odds. Initially she believed, with justification, that the probability of getting her most preferred outcome was low. Most Indian women whose marriages fail are blamed for the failure by their families of origin and rejected. Knowing how things ordinarily worked in her society, she only left after her husband he had a vasectomy (in order to take advantage of the Indian government's financial incentive program for voluntary sterilization). Prior to that she calculated, reasonably, that having children would improve her status and open up the possibility of future financial support from them. So long as the possibility of having children, carrying with it the prospect of improved treatment, was open she did not think it worthwhile to take the risk of entering into negotiations with her family or origin. Once the prospect of improvement disappeared she judged the risk of approaching her family worthwhile and, happily, achieved a good outcome

¹³ See Paul Samuelson, "The Pure Theory of Consumer's Behavior" in *Economica* vol. 5 No. 17 (Feb 1938) 61-71. Samuelson notes that nothing he has said in his revealed preference account of consumer behavior "affects in any way or 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." On his account, the victim of a mugging who chooses to give his assailant \$20 to keep from getting beaten up is in the same position as the shopper who chooses to pay \$4.95 for a raspberry white chocolate latte. In

both cases they, tautologously, choose what they prefer from amongst available options and, the preference utilitarian would add, what is best for them in the circumstances. The account does not however suggest that mugging is a morally innocuous free market transaction or purport to provide conditions for distinguishing consumer behavior from coercion and victimization. Arguably, when Jayamma chooses to put up with poor working conditions and low wages she is getting what she prefers from amongst her available options and what is best for her given her circumstances and lack of viable alternatives. It does not follow that these conditions are morally acceptable and there is no need to show that her preferences have been “distorted” in order to make the case that her prospects should be improved.