

Must Theorizing About Adaptive Preferences Deny Women's Agency?

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1. Introduction

Feminists argue that women's compliance with sexist norms does not legitimate those norms. The mere fact that women participate in misogynistic beauty practices, acquiesce in unjust gender divisions of labor, accept lesser claims on food and resources, and so forth does not place such behaviors—or the norms that dictate them—beyond scrutiny. In other words, it does not follow from the fact that women perpetuate their oppression that their oppression is justified. Most arguments to this effect rely on the intuition that women do not express their “true preferences” when they comply with sexist norms. Preferences whereby women perpetuate their oppression that seem not to truly belong to them are often called “adaptive preferences.” The concept of adaptive preference (hereafter AP) promises to explain why such preferences seem inauthentic. Yet it has also generated significant controversy. One important debate is about how to distinguish APs from legitimate but unfamiliar conceptions of the good.¹ Another debate—the one I address in this article—is about whether it is disrespectful to say that oppressed people form preferences that are causally related to injustice. The idea of AP, some critics assert, involves analogizing people who perpetuate their oppression to victims of “brainwashing or psychosurgery”², or treating them as “dupes of patriarchy”³. According to these critics, AP theorists deny the fact that real-world women often reflectively-- and even autonomously-- perpetuate their oppression.⁴

The critics think that pointing out a person's APs amounts to calling her a defective agent—one who is incapable of acting reflectively or formulating and pursuing ends that are genuinely her own.⁵ I argue that there is a plausible conception of AP that both enables critical attitudes toward women's participation in their oppression *and* acknowledges the persistence of agentic capacities in many oppressed people. Whether defective agency is a requirement for AP depends on how a conception of AP accounts for a certain intuition. This is the intuition that agents' preferences to perpetuate their oppression are often not “truly theirs.” Prevailing conceptions of AP account for this intuition by claiming that APs involve deficient autonomy. In contrast, my weakly perfectionist conception of AP allows that people can and do autonomously perpetuate their own oppression. On my conception, APs are preferences formed in response to unjust social arrangements that are incompatible with a person's basic wellbeing. Their unreliability as indicators of the agent's true desires stems from a combination of the perfectionist assumption that most people do not desire their deprivation and a recognition of manifold ways that unjust arrangements prevent the oppressed from living out their true desires.

In the next section of the paper, I argue that the agency criticisms help us understand what a respectful conception of AP needs to do. In section three, I show how three competing conceptions of AP fail to meet the desiderata suggested by the agency critics (hereafter the agency desiderata). These competing conceptions account for the intuition that APs do not belong to their bearers by casting AP as a form of autonomy deficiency. In section four, I show how my weakly perfectionist conception of AP successfully avoids the agency criticisms.

2. Desiderata for an Agency-Recognizing Conception of AP

I believe that the concept of AP serves two functions in feminist theory. One is to provide a moral account of the intuition that preferences whereby people perpetuate their oppression often seem inauthentic. The other is to supply a widely applicable narrative about why actual women perpetuate their oppression. Feminist philosophies of AP cannot do the political work feminists want them to do without supplying such a narrative. Feminist theorists of AP are looking for a general sort of response to the claim—so common in politics and public policy-- that women's enjoyment of sexist practices makes such practices morally and politically unproblematic.⁶

The agency critics focus on disputing AP theorists' narrative about why women perpetuate their oppression. The critics frequently employ empirical counterexamples. Interestingly, the critics tend to concede that the patriarchal norms women in their examples comply with are genuinely oppressive. The issue is that AP theorists misunderstand women's reasons for complying. Though specific arguments vary, the criticisms are structurally similar. They share the following line of reasoning: actual women who perpetuate their oppression retain agential capacities, and popular theories of AP deny this. These agency critics hold that prevalent theories of AP are morally problematic as well as misrepresentative, since misrepresenting people who perpetuate their oppression as defective agents may justify objectionable paternalism towards them. I focus here on the work of two agency critics, Brooke Ackerly and Uma Narayan.

These particular agency critics are worth taking seriously because of their in-depth empirical knowledge about the people most frequently described as having APs. Their level of experience with--and engagement with social scientific data about--these women exceeds those of more mainstream feminist AP theorists⁷. Who are these women who are likely to be described as having APs? They are disproportionately third-world⁸ women-- at least in the work of Martha Nussbaum and Susan Okin—who, in addition to being the most prominent feminist theorists of AP, are the targets of Ackerly's and Narayan's criticisms.⁹ But it is clear that third-world women are not the only ones who perpetuate their oppression. Examples of Western women adapting their preferences (by participating in sexist beauty practices and gendered labor choices, for instance) were extremely common in feminist philosophy at least until the late 1990s (though at that time, the idea had other names, like "deformed desire," "false consciousness," and "internalized oppression"). As Alison Jaggar argues, feminist theorists should wonder why a new term has become popular, why those interested in why women perpetuate their oppression are now predominantly interested in third-world women, and why philosophers are so quick to label participation in non-Western cultural practices as APs.¹⁰ It is outside the scope of this article to address all of these questions, but they are important to contemporary feminist scholarship.

The disproportionate focus on third-world women suggests something specific for our present line of inquiry about the agency of the oppressed—something that adds presumptive value to empirically informed criticisms of AP. We have reason to worry that the existing conception of AP grew out of an attempt on Nussbaum's and Okin's part to theorize about experiences they knew little about. They had limited empirical knowledge and potential epistemic prejudices about the people they appear to have had in mind while developing the conception of AP. Another reason to doubt Nussbaum's and Okin's conception of AP is that elements of it echo colonial stereotypes about third-world women. According to Nussbaum and Okin's narrative, third-world women comply with oppressive norms because of defective agency. This portrayal converges with widespread Western stereotypes of third-world women as passive victims of ultrapatriarchal cultures.¹¹ I am about to proceed under the assumption that the critics' narrative about why women perpetuate their oppression is superior to Nussbaum's and Okin's. I cannot prove that the critics' narrative is superior, because the narrative is ultimately an empirical claim. But I point out these reasons for skepticism of Nussbaum's and Okin's empirical claims to justify my presumptively crediting the critics.

Let us turn to the specific claims about AP by Nussbaum and Okin that have become controversial. Okin's controversial claim is the following rhetorical question about women in cultures she perceives as ultra-patriarchal: what if acquiescence "in cultural practices stems from lack of power, or socialization to inferior roles, resulting in a lack of self-esteem or sense of entitlement?"¹² Nussbaum's controversial claim is that women are likely to accept unjust treatment because they have "internalized the ideas behind the traditional system of discrimination."¹³

To schematically capture the critics' main responses: Narayan answers Okin with a few different statements about the Pirzada women of Delhi, who practice religious veiling and seclusion. According to

Narayan, these women a) are sometimes right when they describe their options as limited¹⁴; b) experience internal conflict about the acceptability of the norms that oppress them (they disapprove of women whom they perceive as immodest, yet simultaneously envy those who have married into less restrictive families; they also criticize purdah for making them “look like water buffalo” and limiting their educational access); c) gain objective benefits from their compliance with oppressive norms (such as class status and the ability to move anonymously in public); and d) would thus possibly have their lives worsened by coercive policies aimed at changing their behavior.¹⁵ Ackerly responds to Nussbaum by describing her field research on women’s literacy programs run by BRAC, a Bangladeshi development organization. According to Ackerly, Nussbaum, who uses BRAC examples herself, mistakenly believes that the Bangladeshi women’s low participation stems from an inability to value education. Ackerly counters that she, unlike Nussbaum, has personally interacted with over 800 women in such programs. According to Ackerly, these women value education but are forced to choose between educating themselves and their male children (whose education is a better long-term financial investment).

If we assume these criticisms are correct, two responses are available to us. We can scrap the concept of AP altogether, or we can look for a conception that responds to the critics’ concerns. I take the latter path, because the concept of AP (or something like it) is indispensable for feminism; it provides grounds for questioning preferences whereby women perpetuate sexist oppression. The critics help us identify several distinct desiderata that a respectful conception of AP must meet. The desiderata cluster around two concerns. The first is about recognizing how people who reproduce their oppression often retain rationality. The second is about ensuring that people with APs receive respectful treatment in practice. Since the term “rationality” can be understood in a number of ways, I identify three distinct desiderata related to acknowledging the rationality of people who reproduce their oppression. These I term the *cognitive capacity*, *complex moral psychology*, and *limited option sets* desiderata. The *cognitive capacity desideratum* asks us to recognize that the oppressed can render accurate non-normative judgments about their opportunities—as Narayan notes when she writes that the Pirzada women may be *right* that they lack the skills and opportunities that would allow them to move freely in public.¹⁶ The *complex moral psychology desideratum* asks us to acknowledge that the oppressed often have ambivalent feelings about unjust norms. They may actively question those norms, as Narayan’s Pirzada women do when—despite affirming norms of female modesty— they bemoan seclusion’s effect on their educational opportunities. Or the oppressed may suppress what was once an active desire to question to avoid the pain and dissonance of wishing for a better world that will never come. The *limited option sets desideratum* draws on a normatively laden conception of rationality. It asks us to recognize that an agent can simultaneously do her best to advance her interests and perpetuate her oppression; sometimes all of the paths to advance an oppressed agent’s interests are, as Marilyn Frye famously puts it, “booby-trapped.”¹⁷ Ackerly’s Bangladeshi women do not pursue their own literacy, but this is because there is no option to pursue both education and income security simultaneously. Oppression-complicit behaviors can be rational both in the sense that they reveal active strategizing and in the sense that they reflect undistorted values.

The agency critics care about oppressed people’s rationality partly because they want to protect real-world oppressed people from disrespectful treatment. This interest generates two practical desiderata: the *noncoercion* and *dialogue* desiderata. The noncoercion desideratum asks us to acknowledge that a person can participate in injustice against herself without being a legitimate object of coercion. One concern behind the noncoercion desideratum is principled; if people reflectively engage in behavior whereby they reproduce their oppression (as the examples of the Bangladeshi and Pirzada women suggest), they do not—at least according to liberals—deserve to be coerced into changing their behavior. A second concern is prudential; oppression-perpetuators who are doing their best to advance their (correctly perceived) interests may actually have their lives worsened through

coercive or inappropriately tailored intervention. For instance, Narayan writes that coercing women into abandoning veiling might cause them to lose mobility and class status.

Concerns about coercion and epistemic humility generate another practical desideratum, the *dialogue* desideratum. Ackerly and Narayan argue that interventions to improve the lives of the oppressed would improve if they took the first-person perspectives of the oppressed into account. Ackerly writes that the literacy program failed because of its misunderstanding of how women in the Bangladeshi context could access income—a misunderstanding that could have been avoided if the program had grown out of participatory research. Narayan argues that attempts to change preferences like the Pirzada women's should change women's sensibilities rather than restrict their options.¹⁸ The input of people who perpetuate their oppression can contribute to strategies for ending that oppression; the dialogue desideratum asks for a conception of AP that does not deny this.

3. Autonomy Conceptions of AP and Agency

Nussbaum and Okin suggest that people with APs lack autonomy.¹⁹ Autonomy involves exercising the deliberative and self-interpretive capacities that allow an individual to sustain her own normative point of view. The underlying intuition behind autonomy conceptions of AP is this: APs seem not to truly belong to agents, because unjust conditions have either a) caused those agents to lack normative points of view that are genuinely theirs or b) generated views in those agents that they themselves would repudiate. Nussbaum and Okin do not tell us much about what they mean by "autonomy," so their views about what is morally problematic about APs are largely implicit. To see what follows from Nussbaum's and Okin's repeated intimations that APs are autonomy compromising, we need some idea of what understandings of autonomy Nussbaum and Okin are working with. Since Nussbaum's and Okin's theories of autonomy are mostly implicit, I proceed by plugging three popular feminist conceptions of autonomy into Nussbaum's and Okin's work on AP. I ask what claims about the agency of the oppressed would follow if Nussbaum and Okin understood AP as the lack of any of the following: reflectiveness about one's life-plan, deficient self-worth, or lack of reflectiveness /self-worth in some specific domain of life.

Some feminist theorists describe autonomy as reflectiveness about one's life plan. Autonomous agents ask whether they want socially dictated preferences to shape their aspirations. On a reflectiveness view, APs are problematic primarily because agents who have them uncritically endorse unjust norms. Anita Superson reads Nussbaum's early work on APs²⁰ as advocating such a reflectiveness conception of AP.²¹ Nussbaum asserts that failure to question norms arises from forms of socialization that are akin manipulation or indoctrination.²² Consider an example of a preference described as adaptive across a wide range of literature—many South Asian women's adherence to sexist food distribution norms that require them to provide superior nutrition to their husbands. On a reflectiveness conception of AP, such women's preferences result from women's inability to scrutinize norms and know what they really want.

On a second autonomy conception of AP, APs involve deficient self-worth. Okin suggests she believes something like this when she writes, "oppressed people may have internalized their oppression so well that they have no sense of what they are entitled to as human beings."²³ On this second understanding of autonomy, advocated by Babbitt and Superson, among others, autonomy requires a robust sense of one's self as deserving welfare; one simply does not have a point of view if one does not see one's interests as worth advancing. Unjust conditions can teach subordinated individuals to devalue their well-being²⁴. On the self-worth view, the woman in our example probably eats less because she has internalized the belief that she is a being of lesser value.

These two autonomy conceptions of AP do somewhat poorly at satisfying the desiderata related to rationality, because, on these conceptions, people perpetuate their oppression because they misperceive reality. The conception of AP as caused by unreflectiveness about social norms does not

violate the cognitive capacity desideratum (except rhetorically through the use of the term “unreflective”). On a reflectiveness conception of AP, an agent may make accurate non-normative judgments despite having unscrutinized values. The self-worth conception of AP, however, fails to satisfy the cognitive capacity desideratum. It encourages us to read oppressed people’s claims about their limitations as evidence of distorted normative beliefs about themselves—rather than accurate non-normative judgments about the world. That is, the self-worth view suggests we read claims like the Pirzada women’s claims that they lack the skills required for urban mobility as false judgments borne from low self-esteem rather than realistic assessments of their situation. Both the reflectiveness and self-worth conceptions do poorly against the limited option sets desideratum, because they represent the agent with AP as lacking good values. The reflectiveness conception says that, even if the agent has some good values, they are not hers; the self-worth conception says that she holds bad values about her own worth. Both views thus misrepresent cases like Ackerly’s Bangladeshi women as having no self-esteem or no real idea of what they want—when, in reality, they reflectively value their well-being but cannot achieve it because of option constraints. The reflectiveness and self-worth views do not satisfy the complex moral psychology desideratum because they are totalizing; on them, the agent with APs completely endorses the order of domination because she does not reflect on it and/or because she has internalized its entire picture of what she deserves.

Because they assert that agents with APs simply lack normative points of view, the self-worth and reflectiveness conceptions also fail to satisfy the desiderata concerning how APs should be responded to in practice. Liberals hold that people with normative points of view should not be coerced into changing self-regarding preferences-- but offers no similarly principled protection to people who lack them. The reflectiveness and self-esteem conceptions thus seem to justify coercion of people with APs. Further, the self-esteem and reflectiveness conceptions ask us to imagine oppression perpetrators as wrong about what they deserve. If oppressed people are likely wrong about what they deserve, we have little reason to believe that coercion might worsen their situation--and little reason to value their first-person input into developing strategies for change. If an individual either has *no* reflective values—or *completely distorted* ones-- dialogue with her is likely to end in her unthinkingly recommending the continuation of the unjust status quo. For instance, if our self-denying woman has no sense of what she cares about from which to evaluate social norms, dialogue with her is likely to result in her supporting sexist food distributions because “that is just the way things are”.

The reflectiveness and self-esteem views justify disrespect largely because they equate AP and global autonomy impairment. On a third family of views about autonomy, APs would be *localized*, or domain-specific autonomy deficits. Paul Benson advocates something like a localized version of autonomy as reflectiveness. He argues that one acts from one’s perspective only if one has morally scrutinized the specific social norms implicated in one’s action.²⁵ A conception of AP based in Benson’s ideas about normative competence would state that the self-denying woman’s preferences are problematic because she has not initiated specific reflection that would reveal the injustice of prevailing food norms. Also in this third family would be a local understanding of the self-worth view. Catriona MacKenzie argues that autonomy requires self-worth but that an agent’s conception of self-worth may vary from decision to decision.²⁶ Our self-denying woman may have a deficient sense of entitlement to food but value her welfare in other areas.

These more nuanced views of autonomy respond promisingly to the complex moral psychology desideratum, the principled part of the noncoercion desideratum, and the dialogue desideratum. The localized views allow that people can perpetuate their oppression and retain critical attitudes toward some norms. Still, these localized views may seem to fall foul of the complex moral psychology desideratum, because they deny that individuals can have ambivalent feelings toward a *single* norm. If endorsement comes in degrees, however, localized views can explain cases like the Pirzada women who

simultaneously endorse (by valuing sexual purity) and do not endorse (by complaining about looking like water buffalo) a single set of modesty norms. The localized views meet the principled portion of the noncoercion desideratum and the dialogue desideratum, because they do not suggest that people with APs have normative perspectives entirely eclipsed. If an agent retains the capacity to critically distance herself from norms, and if there remain undistorted values in her worldview, we have reason for optimism about her capacity for uncoerced change. Our self-denying woman may, for instance, oppose patriarchal norms about women's education and be capable of extending this criticism to the domain of nutrition once prompted to do so. Localized autonomy views make clear how a person can retain a normative perspective and be worthy of consultation about her life, despite endorsing her oppression to some extent.

The localized autonomy conceptions of AP, like their global counterparts, respond differently to the cognitive capacity desideratum. Where the normative competence view does not fall foul, the localized self-worth view (like the global version) pushes a particular interpretation of oppressed people's claims that what they can accomplish is limited. It suggests such claims involve mistaken normative views about self-worth rather than accurate statements of facts. Both localized autonomy views fare somewhat poorly against the limited option sets desideratum and the prudential portion of the noncoercion desideratum. The views have the advantage of allowing AP to coexist with good values on the part of the agent. But they do not allow people's APs to be *motivated by* good values. The Bangladeshi women do not simply hold a (good) value for their financial security alongside a (distorted and/or uncriticized) lack of value for their education. They value their education and financial security and perpetuate their oppression because they cannot get both. The localized views, however, suggest that their nonparticipation in the literacy program comes from a failure to scrutinize anti-female literacy norms or a failure to see themselves as worthy of literacy. Since they suggest that agents who perpetuate their oppression are to some extent wrong about what is in their interests, the localized views give us little reason to suspect that those agents are already doing the best they *can* do—and thus offer few prudential reasons for opposing coercion.

But perhaps the shortcomings of the normative competence and localized self-esteem views of AP do not seem like shortcomings at all. I criticized all of the above conceptions of AP for failing to designate oppression-perpetuating preferences motivated primarily by option restriction as adaptive. But the term "AP" has the word "preference" in it, and perhaps behaviors chosen because of severe option restriction are not *preferences* at all. It may seem incorrect, for instance, to describe the Bangladeshi widows' ranking of financial security over literacy, as the expression of a preference; perhaps the only true preference these women have is for a world where they do not have to choose. One response to this criticism is that preferences caused by poor options are frequently described as APs in the literature; Nussbaum discusses women who accept poor sanitation because they do not have access to it, and Amartya Sen describes people who decide to stop bemoaning the tyranny of their government because they correctly believe they cannot overthrow it.²⁷ A more theoretical response is that preferences among poor options still express rankings and thus tell us something about an agent's values. So, the Bangladeshi women's choice of long-term security shows that they value financial security—even that they value it more than their own literacy. It is true enough that they wish they could have both, but we can accommodate this by distinguishing higher and lower-order preferences. The Bangladeshi women have a lower-order AP without a higher-order one, and we should not ignore this. Yet I see little reason to treat lower-order expressed preferences as non-preferences, since they do express rankings related to the agent's values. Further, struggling to express our higher-order preferences under nonideal conditions is just a part of normal agency; the champagne lover who cannot have champagne every day and ends up choosing prosecco over coca-cola clearly expresses a preference.²⁸

I have criticized autonomy conceptions of AP for failing to include preferences caused by option restriction. It may seem that my criticism takes autonomy theorists to be claiming something they never intended—that all behavior in which people reproduce their oppression is caused by compromised autonomy. Some feminist autonomy theorists—such as Marilyn Friedman, Diana Meyers, and those described above who see autonomy as reflectiveness—hold that people may autonomously comply with oppressive norms.²⁹ On these theorists' procedural conceptions of autonomy, choices can be autonomous irrespective of whether they are harmful. I concede that procedural autonomy theorists recognize the agency of the oppressed. However, the implications of this fact are not what they initially seem. First, this fact does not pose problems for my claim that *autonomy theories of AP* deny oppressed people's agency. A conception of autonomy is not the same thing as a conception of AP. We want different things from each. As I claimed earlier, a conception of AP is supposed to justify scrutiny of a wide range of behaviors whereby people reproduce their oppression. We want to refute claims that women's conscious participation in oppressive practices legitimates those practices. A conception of AP that includes only nonautonomous preferences will apply to too small a subset of behaviors whereby women perpetuate their oppression. Second, it does not follow from procedural autonomy theories' acknowledgement of agency that we do not need a separate conception of AP—that a conception of *autonomy* can simply do the work we want a *conception of AP* to do. A procedural conception of autonomy on its own will not explain why it is morally problematic when women perpetuate their oppression—regardless of whether they endorse it.³⁰ What we need is a conception of AP that justifies questioning preferences of various degrees of autonomy.

4. A Weak Perfectionist Conception of AP

It is unsurprising that autonomy conceptions of AP struggle to satisfy the agency desiderata; they say that APs are autonomy deficits, and the critics insist that people can retain autonomy while perpetuating their oppression.³¹ But if women autonomously perpetuate their oppression, what grounds remain for criticizing women's compliance with unjust norms? If women's oppression-perpetuating preferences do not issue from respectable normative perspectives, we have clear, liberalism-compatible grounds for public scrutiny of those preferences. If women reflectively participate in their oppression, the case becomes less clear. We seem to face a choice: call APs autonomy deficits and retain grounds for questioning behavior wherein women perpetuate their oppression—or, acknowledge the autonomy of many such behaviors but severely narrow the range of preferences worthy of intervention or scrutiny.

I propose an alternative conception of AP that supplies grounds for questioning many oppression-perpetuating preferences—and does so without denying the agency oppressed people often retain. An AP, on my view, is a preference (higher or lower-order) that is incompatible with an agent's basic welfare and is causally related to the conditions of oppression under which it formed. There are a number of ways—not all of which involve deficient autonomy—in which a preference can be causally related to unjust conditions. A person may lack her own normative perspective from which to decide whether she wants to hold a given preference, or she may have an unscrutinized preference she would repudiate, if given the opportunity to reflect on its genesis. But a causal relationship to injustice also exists if the preference would disappear upon the agent's increased exposure to better conditions or the (moral or nonmoral) facts. The self-denying woman in our example may eat less than her husband because she was raised to see herself as unworthy of food, or because she does not ask about the moral acceptability of sexist food norms. She may be unaware of other possible (nonsexist) food distribution norms. Or she may deprive herself only because of conditions where keeping her male relatives happy is the best way to ensure access to income, safety, and so on.³² The woman who denies herself food for any of these reasons has a preference causally related to injustice, and thus an AP, on my conception.

Readers may wonder why I focus on preferences causally related to *injustice*. I focus on unjust conditions rather than simply *conditions*, because many preferences caused by conditions do not intuitively seem adaptive. I listen to mp3s because my friends listen to mp3s. I am probably ignorant of the existence of some better musical technology, but my preference for mp3s does not seem particularly morally problematic. More complicated is the question of why I have focused on *unjust* rather than simply *harmful* conditions. Imagine the case of a person who is justly imprisoned and stops exercising because of the confines of her cell.³³ Feminists use the term AP specifically to identify self-regarding preferences worthy of social concern; the line of thinking is that preferences caused by an unjust social order merit a social response. If the prisoner's preference is adaptive in the sense feminist theorists intend, I would suggest it is because injustice is involved. For instance, preventing prisoners from exercising may violate their rights. Though there may be a sense in which all externally caused harmful preferences are adaptive, feminist political aims seem to dictate a narrow usage of the term AP.

My conception of AP needs certain substantive moral commitments if it is to furnish grounds for arguing that APs do not "truly belong" to the people who have them. The key commitment is to a perfectionist premise: that human beings tend to desire what promotes their basic wellbeing. Perfectionists hold that the good lies in the development of human nature. We need not subscribe to a fully perfectionist theory of value to accept that it is part of human nature to desire one's basic welfare. If we accept this, we can reasonably suspect that people do not wish to retain preferences inconsistent with their basic welfare. It is outside of the scope of this paper to settle on a conception of welfare, but my overall argument does not depend on such specification. Clearly, my conception of AP must be accompanied by a notion of welfare that matches up with our intuitions about which real-world preferences are adaptive. Something like Nussbaum's capabilities list³⁴ or Akerly's list of items people should be able to choose³⁵ can probably do this job. Varying the contents of our notion of welfare would change *which particular preferences* counted as APs, but would be unlikely to change much about the relationship between APs and the agency of those who have them.³⁶ This is because the claim that APs are compatible with autonomy is more a claim about the world (and what types of constraints on choice exist) than a claim about the good.

My conception of AP offers a particular account of the intuition that agents did not choose to perpetuate their oppression. On my account, an agent's true preferences are those she would endorse under conditions conducive to her basic wellbeing. A (weak) claim about human nature permits certain (fallible) third-party predictions about what the content of those true preferences is likely to be. The claim about human nature on its own gives us reason to suspect that extremely self-depriving preferences are causally related to conditions. The preference for undernutrition is unlikely to belong to an agent with sufficient access to food, for example, or to an agent who can access safety and income without foregoing food. Where social structures prevent an agent from pursuing basic wellbeing, we have two reasons to suspect the authenticity of her preferences to collude with unjust forces—their unusual content and the existence of (structural and psychological) impediments to choice. My perfectionist conception of AP does not deny that agents may have true preferences for self-sacrifice. I may just happen to be altruistic in a way that makes me want to relinquish my food. My account describes true self-sacrificing preferences as atypical but does not recommend their eradication. If a person retains self-sacrificing preferences despite being aware of their effects and alternatives, and despite being exposed to alternative moral views and superior opportunities, those preferences are really hers.

Of course, it is one thing to furnish grounds for suspecting that an agent's preferences are not hers and another to furnish grounds compatible with liberalism. Autonomy conceptions of AP are unlikely to face the objection that they are illiberal. It may seem that a perfectionist conception of AP has to be illiberal. However, my perfectionist assumptions are weak enough to coexist with liberal commitments. A perfectionist conception of the good must be restricted in two ways to be acceptable

to liberals. First, there must be limits on the means of promoting perfectionist goals—especially coercive means.³⁷ Two key implications of my conception of AP weigh *against* coercing oppressed people into changing their preferences. First, my conception allows that many people with APs retain autonomy. It also allows that many APs are welfare-maximizing responses to bad options—and thus suggests that in many cases, coercive interventions risk worsening people’s lives.

Second, a perfectionist conception must not be enmeshed with a particular comprehensive conception of the good. My conception of AP requires an objectively valid substantive notion of welfare (one that obtains at least somewhat independently of agents’ actual desires). But such a notion need not be allied with a comprehensive doctrine. Since my definition of AP restricts itself to basic wellbeing, we can imagine a supporting conception of welfare that fits into various conceptions of the good; at the minimal levels of wellbeing, most conceptions of the good seem to converge.³⁸ Conceptions of the good like Akerly’s and Nussbaum’s lists focus on basic welfare and are freestanding—endorsable from a wide range of comprehensive doctrines.

My view suggests some important things about the relationship between APs and autonomy. First, though constraints on choice are necessary for AP, compromised autonomy is not. Impediments to an agent’s actualizing her true desires may be structural (as in cases where an agent’s options prevent her from doing she really wants) or psychological (as in cases where she lacks of information, a sense of herself, etc.). Thus, APs sometimes reveal—but need not reveal—compromised autonomy. Second, there is significant variation within the class of APs caused by compromised autonomy or other psychological defects. An agent may perpetuate her oppression because she fails to see herself as a human being with worth, because she is simply misinformed about what the results of her actions will be, or because she—like Narayan’s Prizada women—feels conflicted about whether oppressive norms deserve her endorsement. It is thus not the case that all APs with psychological roots cause compromised autonomy; acting on the basis of incomplete information about the future effects of one’s choices, for instance, seems a necessary feature of human action.

Third, even *nonautonomous* APs may be held by otherwise autonomous agents. This is partly because a person’s autonomy may vary in different domains of life. Suppose that autonomy is the capacity to evaluate one’s preferences in light of one’s higher-order beliefs and desires. We can imagine an agent who generally possesses this capacity but also possesses some specific unscrutinized preferences. Think of the Pirzada woman who endorses her seclusion but has a higher-order desire for education. We can imagine her as seeking harmony among her lower and higher-order desires but failing to realize that her desire for seclusion impedes her pursuit of education. There is another reason APs involving compromised autonomy may occur in agents who are partly autonomous: political, personal, and moral autonomy may not be coextensive. Combined with such an understanding of autonomy, my conception of AP allows that some personally nonautonomous preferences remain politically respectable. We typically think that a politically or morally autonomous person should not be coerced into changing her self-regarding behavior. So, for instance, the Pirzada woman’s reflective preference not to pursue education—even if it has not been made compatible with the rest of her worldview—may meet standards for *political* autonomy and thus not merit coercive intervention.³⁹

My conception of AP satisfies the agency desiderata, by separating AP from the judgment that an agent cannot reason about her good. Agents can perpetuate their oppression without experiencing distortion of their normative and non-normative beliefs. Since my perfectionist conception of AP allows that option restriction (and not just psychological impediments) can prevent an agent from acting according to her true desires, it satisfies the cognitive capacity and limited option sets desiderata, as well as the prudential component of the noncoercion desideratum. My conception allows us to think of preferences like the literacy preferences of the Bangladeshi women as what they actually are—

preferences by which women perpetuate their oppression but by which they also demonstrate self-worth and active reflection about norms and options.

My conception's relationship to the *principled* portion of the noncoercion desideratum is more complicated. I allow that many APs exist in autonomous agents. Suppose autonomy is something like the capacity to reflect on the relationship between one's choices and one's values, the capacity to view one's interests as worth pursuing, or some combination of the two. An autonomous agent can perpetuate her oppression because of limited options (as the Bangladeshi women do) or because some portion of her beliefs are not autonomously endorsed (as does the Pirzada woman with a higher-order preference for education). Noncoercive interventions, such as those involving persuasion and incitements to question prevailing beliefs, seem appropriate public responses to agents in the latter category (i.e. those who experience local value distortion or misinformation without fully compromised autonomy). However, my conception allows that some APs may be caused by genuinely global autonomy deficits. Coercion may be appropriate in the (presumably rare) cases where an agent simply has *no* normative perspective of her own. This conclusion, though unpalatable, is probably as it should be. My conception of AP makes a project of figuring out whether the impediments to an individual's actualizing her true desires are psychological—and of figuring out just how deeply rooted the psychological ones are. But rather than categorically prohibiting coercion, my conception of AP supports the view that public institutions should look for signs of agency in oppressed people—even when agency is not readily visible. My conception of AP recognizes various types constraints on oppressed people's abilities to choose and does not provide a simplistic narrative about why people reproduce their oppression. It thus refuses to justify the hasty conclusion that any particular oppressed person is a defective agent.

The dialogue desideratum asks a conception of AP not to devalue the first-person perspectives of the oppressed. To the extent that my conception suggests that most APs occur in people who maintain autonomy competencies, it allows that many people with APs can meaningfully participate in scrutinizing their own values and behaviors. My conception offers a further justification for dialogical responses to AP; it makes an agent's reasons for perpetuating her oppression into a genuine puzzle. If I am correct that people perpetuate their oppression for many reasons, we cannot simply read a person's reasons for action off her behavior. That an agent in a context with sexist food norms eats less than her husband does not yet tell us whether she believes she is a lesser human being, seeks favor with her male relatives, wants to feel like a "dutiful woman"—or something else entirely. Simply observing behavior cannot tell us whether a person truly wants to perpetuate her oppression, or whether the constraints on her choices are psychological or structural. First-person perspectives can thus provide important information about whether people have APs and what transforming them would require.

Even if my conception of AP satisfies the agency desiderata, it may seem to disrespect the oppressed in a way autonomy conceptions do not. It may be insulting to approach people with APs as though they have defective values. It would seem that my perfectionist conception, with its reference to objective welfare, recommends such treatment—and does so more strongly than the autonomy alternatives. I offer a few different lines of reasoning in reply. First, autonomy conceptions with substantive content also entail the view that people with APs have defective values. Both the self-esteem views and the normative competence view claim that people with APs have failed to value something they ought to value (in the former case, their wellbeing; in the latter, justice). Second, my view does not claim that all people with APs have defective values; it says APs may be caused by misinformation or option restriction. On my view, many APs arise because of defects in the world, not defects in the agent; we can say that the agent has made certain choices incompatible with her wellbeing without tracing those choices to defective values or agency. These points are not decisive in favor of my view, however. Value distortion occurs in degrees, and even a weak perfectionist conception

of AP probably commits us to a more robust idea of what values agents *should* have than do autonomy conceptions. My conception of AP also allows that some subset of people with APs experiences value distortion.

My third and fourth replies weigh more strongly in favor of my view but ask us to get clearer about what would be objectionable about questioning another's values. Such questioning seems to me to be wrong when it undermines, or seeks to undermine, the entire perspective from which the other person sees the world—not when it interrogates just one part of that vision. The underlying concern about questioning others' values may be a veiled concern about culture; perhaps my conception seems to imply viewing oppressed people's cultures merely as collections of false moral views. My third reply responds specifically to this concern. The notion of wellbeing my conception requires is too weak to invalidate any entire cultural worldview. My conception of AP facilitates judgments like, "believing one deserves less food because of one's gender is wrong." Some cultural values and preferences are incompatible with basic human welfare, but I see no reason to believe that any culture consists entirely of such values.

But perhaps the critic is more interested in protecting *personal* worldviews. My fourth reply is simply not to grant that it is disrespectful to treat another as though she has *some* bad values. Being subject to criticism of one's values is just part of being a normal moral agent. Indeed, many moral philosophers suggest that criticizing another's values is a way of *respecting* her—of treating her as a co-participant in a moral community. In most cases where an oppressed agent appears to experience value distortion, my conception of AP only recommends suspicion that *some* of her values are incorrect. My view emphasizes the variety of attitudes and levels of value distortion that accompany psychologically-rooted APs, and thus suggests that the set of cases of complete worldview is probably small.

In practice, judgments that others have APs are often made across significant power differences (especially because such judgments are often made by Western women about third-world women). We need restrictions that will prevent practitioners from abusing this power to criticize. Practitioners also need to experience criticism from others whose worldviews differ from their own. Some readers may be unsatisfied with this response given that it does rule out the possibility that some people should be told their worldviews are completely incorrect. But autonomy conceptions of AP, assuming that they do not rule out cases of completely compromised autonomy (and none of them seem to rule out such cases; they just differ about their prevalence), have equally worrisome consequences. Autonomy conceptions of AP that incorporate substantive values and my perfectionist conception are equally susceptible to the criticism that they treat some people as victims of complete value distortion. *All* (procedural and substantive) autonomy conceptions of AP suggest that many oppressed people simply lack worldviews of their own. Most imaginable conceptions of AP leave open the possibility that oppression causes completely eclipsed autonomy or worldview distortion. My conception at least encourages us to acknowledge that completely eclipsed autonomy is not the only or main reason people comply with oppressive norms.

5. Conclusion

If APs must be understood as autonomy deficits, feminists face a choice with regard to women's oppression-perpetuating beliefs and behaviors: either justify social scrutiny of them based on false views about their genesis, or treat most of them as though they are consented to and morally unproblematic. My weak perfectionist conception of AP allows us to retain a commitment to morally interrogating preferences by which women perpetuate injustice against themselves. It does so without denying that women exercise agency under unjust conditions. A conception of AP should explain a crucial feminist intuition—that preferences whereby women reproduce their domination often seem not to be their real preferences. For a conception of AP to serve feminist politics, it must explain this intuition about a wide range of cases. A useful conception of AP will allow that oppression-perpetuating

behaviors undertaken for a variety of reasons deserve public scrutiny. When we use weak perfectionist preferences to account for the apparent inauthenticity of APs, we see that agents can have preferences that are not truly theirs without having experienced dramatic psychological interference. We retain the possibility that some people perpetuate their oppression because of value distortion but suggest that such distortion may be partial and thus coexist with significant autonomy competencies. We also retain the possibility that people often perpetuate their oppression without experiencing value distortion at all. My perfectionist conception of AP points out that a broad range of preferences are causally and problematically related to patriarchy without denying the reality of women's agency.

Notes

¹ I have written elsewhere about Western feminist tendencies confuse unfamiliar preferences with harmfully adaptive ones. See Serene Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Serene Khader, 'On identifying adaptive preferences in practice', *Journal of Global Ethics* (forthcoming 2013). For other instances of this claim, see Allison Jaggar, 'Saving Amina: global justice for women and intercultural dialogue', *Ethics and International Affairs* 19, Fall (2005): 55–75, at p. 68-69. and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² H.E. Baber, 'Adaptive preference', *Social Theory and Practice* 33, 1 (2007): 105–126, at p. 118

³ Uma Narayan, 'Minds of their own: choices, autonomy, cultural practices, and other women' in Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (ed.) *A Mind of One's Own* (Cambridge: Westview, 2002), pp. 418-433, at p. 418

⁴ The idea that women accept and perpetuate their deprivation is frequently rejected out of hand in interdisciplinary Women's studies. See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*. (Princeton: Princeton, 2005), at p. 5-10 for a review of the state of scholarship on agency under oppression.

⁵ See H.E. Baber, op. cit., 2007. p. 33, Brooke A. Ackerly. *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), Uma Narayan, op. cit., 2002, p. 418-433, and Bhiku Parekh. 'A varied moral world,' in Cohen, Howard, and Nussbaum, eds. *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999), pp. 69-76.

⁶ See, for instance, Nussbaum op. cit., 2001 and Lisa Schwartzman, *Challenging Liberalism* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006) at pp. 49-51

⁷ Ackerly personally conducted long-term fieldwork in Bangladesh. Narayan draws on scholarship by third-world women and social scientific data about them, in addition to her own personal experiences growing up in Asia and Africa. Still, Nussbaum and Okin's empirical engagement is noteworthy among philosophers. Okin cites data about third-world women and poverty, and Nussbaum visited India and cites an ethnography by Martha Chen.

⁸ I say "third world" rather than "South" to emphasize that the Western imaginary characterizes women with APs, not only as poor, but as belonging to "backward cultures."

⁹ Alison Jaggar argues (op.cit., 2005) that Nussbaum and Okin write exclusively about APs of third-world women. Though Jaggar is right that the emphasis on third-world women is disproportionate, Nussbaum discusses American women's APs in Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford, 1999), at p.130-154.

¹⁰ Allison Jaggar, op. cit. 2005, p. 55–75.

¹¹ Chandra Mohanty documents this stereotype in 'Under western eyes,' 1988. *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn): 61-88.

¹² Susan Okin, "Feminism and multiculturalism: some tensions", *Ethics* 108 (4): 661-684, at p. 675.

¹³ 'Martha Nussbaum, 'Human capabilities: female human beings' in *Women, Culture, and Development* (Oxford: Clarendon), 1995, at p. 91.

¹⁴ Narayan, op. cit., 2002, p. 423.

¹⁵ Narayan, op. cit., 2002 p. 429.

¹⁶ Narayan, op.cit., 2002, p. 420-423.

¹⁷ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*. (Freedom, California: The Crossing, 1993), at p.4.

¹⁸ Narayan, op. cit., 2002, p. 428.

¹⁹For claims that link AP and autonomy, see Martha Nussbaum, *Women and human development: The capabilities approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2001); op. cit., 1999, p. 77 and 140, and Okin, Susan. 'Gender inequality and cultural differences', in Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton (eds.) *Global Ethics* (St. Paul: Paragon, 2008), at p. 249, and Okin, op.cit., 1998.

²⁰Nussbaum, op. cit., 1999, p. 149

²¹I do not share Superson's understanding of Nussbaum. It does not follow from Nussbaum's claim that some preferences form because of lack of information, deliberation, and options that the autonomy of the people who have them is inoperative. Anita Superson 'Deformed desires and informed desire tests'. *Hypatia* 20, 4 (2005): 109-126, at p. 110.

²²Naila Kabeer, 'Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment', *Development and Change* 30, 3 (1999): 435-464, makes a similar claim when she suggests that people do not make real choices when their choices are motivated by doxa.

²³Susan Okin. 'Gender inequality and cultural differences', in Thomas Pogge and Keith Horton (eds.) *Global Ethics* (St. Paul: Paragon, 2008), at p. 249.

²⁴Susan Babbit, 'Feminism and objective interests: The role of transformation experiences in rational deliberation', in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.) *Feminist epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1993) pp. 245-265, at p. 248.

²⁵Benson, Paul. 'Autonomy and oppressive socialization', *Social Theory and Practice* 17 (1991): 385-408.

²⁶Catriona Mackenzie, 'Relational autonomy, normative authority, and perfectionism' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39:4 (2008) pp. 512-533 at pp. 529.

²⁷Nussbaum, op. cit. 2001, p. 113. Amartya Sen, *Rationality and Freedom* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), at p. 634.

²⁸Rawls argues in his discussion of expensive tastes that political reasonableness requires adjusting one's preferences to what is possible in *Political Liberalism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996), at p.186.

²⁹See Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (New York: Oxford, 2003) and Diana Meyers, 'Feminism and women's autonomy', *Metaphilosophy* 31: 5 (2000) pp. 469-491.

³⁰Some readers may not share my intuition that agents can have preferences worthy of public scrutiny despite (procedurally) autonomously endorsing the order of domination. Consider the case of a woman who reflectively and wholeheartedly believes that women should not leave the house because their bodies are too tempting to men. It does not follow from her reflectiveness or wholeheartedness a) that society has not wronged her by encouraging her to believe this or that b) she would continue to believe this on exposure to alternative moral views and better options. It is one thing to respond reflectively to one's *existing* options and the worldviews *to which one has been exposed*; it is another to reflectively respond to options and views that promote one's basic welfare. A person who has done the former meets criteria for procedural autonomy, but I believe society owes her the opportunity to do the latter.

³¹Narayan at one point (p. 430) suggests that the Pirzada women lack autonomy but deserve liberty. Since the remark comes in response to a claim about how substantive autonomy requires more than procedural autonomy, I read Narayan as claiming that the Pirzada women retain procedural autonomy.

³²Bina Agarwal argues that women deprive themselves of food to earn favor with their male relatives despite being critical of sexist food norms. See "'Bargaining" and gender relations: within and beyond the household', *Feminist Economics*, 3, 1 (2001): 1-51.

³³Thanks to one of the reviewers of this article for suggesting this example.

³⁴On Nussbaum's list are life, health, bodily integrity, senses, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, living with other species, play, and control over one's political and material environment, op. cit. 2001, p.79-80

³⁵On Ackerly's list are life, painlessness, knowledge of one's parents, security, communal life, trust, participation, resources, and interdependence op. cit., p.114-115.

³⁶The exception would be a perfectionist notion of welfare on which welfare and the exercise of choice were synonymous, but such a view would dissolve into an autonomy conception of AP.

³⁷For a discussion of how perfectionist political goals must be limited to be liberalism-compatible see Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 110-157.

³⁸ This argument is common in contemporary philosophy of human rights.

³⁹ An autonomy conception of AP could also allow that some agents with APs are politically but not morally autonomous. It would have to specify that APs were deficits in one/some form(s) of autonomy among others but would retain the defects of autonomy conceptions of AP.