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## A Means to an End: Adding Value to the Preference Debate

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**A Means to an End:  
Adding Value to the Preference Debate**

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A Means to an End:  
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Sally<sup>1</sup> is a disadvantaged woman who lives in her car. She has refused many kinds of help – from staying at a shelter to living at government subsidized housing. The help workers who want to assist her are at their wits' end. They know that her living in her car is untenable in the long term, but no amount of conversation will sway her. Even more frustrating, Sally repeatedly insists that she's proud that she's never accepted help from anyone. She'd be the first one to tell you that she's never been on welfare, never taken a hand-out, never begged, and never leaned on the government. Oddly, her face lights up with pride as she recounts these achievements. The social workers know that they will have to call the police if they can't get her to agree to accept their offers of housing. And, Sally knows that she won't change her mind.

In philosophical terms, Sally has an adaptive preference for living in her car. This is because, for reasons that few can understand, Sally has chosen to live in her car rather than in a more stable subsidized apartment even when it was offered to her. While subsidized housing isn't ideal for many, by most people's standards it's still better than living in a car. Yet, reasonable offers of like this have been rejected by Sally. Unfortunately, it seems that her poverty has caused her to prefer her current life lived out of her car, regardless of other available options. In instances like these it is hard to understand Sally's choice,

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<sup>1</sup> Sally is a fictitious name for a woman whom I personally have met. Her name has been changed so that her privacy and struggles can be respected.

and even more difficult to determine the best way to help her. So, what is the best way to help the disadvantaged? Would offering what they prefer be most helpful to them, or is it better to override their preferences? And is the way that we view the choices of the disadvantaged accurate?

In this paper I argue that the traditional philosophical views of the disadvantaged's choices are not wholly accurate nor helpful to intervention efforts. To establish this, I'll discuss the theories of utility, preference utilitarianism, and adaptive preferences. Then I'll sketch a new view of preferences, as means and ends, that explain why the disadvantaged often make what seem to be bad choices. Further, that the reasons behind the disadvantaged's bad choices may not be as bad for them as we believe. Finally, I will explain how to apply this new view of preferences to best help the disadvantaged.

## 1. The Problem

Often the privileged<sup>2</sup> are charged with the task of helping the disadvantaged.<sup>3</sup> This is because the disadvantaged often don't know the best way to help themselves out of their suffering and have few resources (outside of

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<sup>2</sup> Privileged refers to those people who are in stable and secure positions in the socio-political structure of their society.

<sup>3</sup> Disadvantaged refers to the marginalized within societies: race, age, gender and sexual identification (LGBTQAI+), poor, differently abled, and others that their society devalues. The choice to use disadvantaged instead of specifying the circumstance is important because people do not often consider themselves part of a marginalized group. It is my hope that this change in description may prevent othering; where a person sees themselves set apart from those who are like them in their suffering or from those offering their assistance.

the privileged's offerings) to help them. Few disadvantaged people<sup>4</sup>, unless they are activists and likely not disadvantaged themselves, can offer solutions or interventions to assist the disadvantaged; it takes privilege to help the disadvantaged among us. Though, deciding the best way to help often leads the privileged to try to provide the help they would want if they were disadvantaged. This is because those with privilege believe that since they have not suffered through poverty, and have avoided it, that they are able to determine what is best for the disadvantaged.

Further, the choices the disadvantaged make underscore that they most often don't know what's best for them. For example, the disadvantaged may fail to pursue a higher education in favor of a job, even though a minimum wage job will likely only ever pay minimum wage and provide little room for advancement. This choice fails the intuitive understanding of the privileged; long term plans and a bit of suffering now will reap rewards. Further, the disadvantaged may seek comfort in others and prematurely start families by finding solace in romantic relationships as a result of their hardship (Tirado). This choice may or not lead to a lasting relationship with the romantic partner but can lead to the challenges of early parenthood along with the instability involved in raising a child alone. This further exacerbates the challenges for both new parents – together or not. Meanwhile the privileged recognize that delaying parenthood is essential for

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<sup>4</sup> "Around the world and in every U.S. state, women are more likely than men to live in poverty, with additional disparities by race/ethnicity, age, and education level (<https://iwpr.org/issue/poverty-welfare-income-security/poverty/>)." As a result, one cannot deny this is an issue overwhelmingly for women. However, I prefer not to use she/her pronouns because it excludes those in the LGBTQIA+ Community who are some of the most at risk and disadvantaged globally.

personal development and financial security. And, they are unlikely to seek comfort from challenges through their relationships. As a result, the privileged are equipped with healthier coping mechanisms and are more likely to have a larger support group. For those wishing to help the disadvantaged, they believe that their understanding of examples like these will help them provide the aid that will do the most good for those needing their help. Trust, then, rightly belongs in the hands of the privileged and their guidance.

Yet, sometimes it seems that the disadvantaged do know what is best for them. While every choice they make may not be the best one for them under the scrutiny of the privileged, the disadvantaged are the ones who understand why they make the choices they do. It is one thing to say that the disadvantaged do not know how to escape poverty, and another to say that they do not know how to live in poverty and to make the best of their challenging circumstances.

Living in poverty entails more than choosing between higher education or employment or delaying parenting or not; it also requires resourcefulness to arrive at solutions for the issues that plague them. Some practical challenges of the disadvantaged are unreliable transportation, lack of affordable childcare, budgeting limited resources, lack of access to bank accounts, and navigating welfare systems. (This is assuming that they are not homeless – if they are, more practical and life-threatening challenges exist.) There are also intangible challenges to existing in a disadvantaged state, such as sleep deprivation and

the psychological toll of marginalization and social exclusion.<sup>5</sup> Few could argue that the privileged have the experience and understanding needed to overcome problems like these. Considering such challenges, one could argue that the best people to determine what's good for the disadvantaged are themselves.

Based on the above, we have arrived at a crossroads: both the disadvantaged and privileged have reasons to believe that they can best help the disadvantaged. To demonstrate this more clearly, let's consider how each would argue their position. This is what that dialogue might sound like:

Disadvantaged: "You don't know what it's like to be poor. You haven't lived this. You're talking about \$60,000 per year jobs and savings, and I'm talking about working part-time in a gas station without money for a babysitter, and a car that's basically dead."

Privileged: In reply, "I know things are hard for you, but this isn't about the car and all that stuff. It's about all the choices you've made. What made you think the gas station was a good idea? Why did you have a baby when you were so young? What do you mean you don't have a sitter?... I want to help you... Based on what you've said, what I would do is ..."

In this conversation, the disadvantaged person is saying don't complain about my choices; you don't understand, these were my best choices. While the privileged would argue that the disadvantaged must start making better choices, and those

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<sup>5</sup> Social exclusion occurs when a person is deprived of the right to participate in the social system in which they belong. This prevents some people from fully participating in the usual or normal behaviors that their society encourages. Social inclusion has been made the aim of EU 2020 initiatives regarding poverty and the marginalized.

choices should look like what the privileged person would do. What is not being acknowledged in this conversation is that neither can relate to the other, even though they are both talking about decisions and choices. The disadvantaged understand their limited choices and making the best choice from among those, while the privileged person wants the disadvantaged person to consider other choices that would improve their situation.

The challenge here is that the disadvantaged cannot have a view of their challenges from any perspective other than their own. And the privileged cannot set aside their view of the disadvantaged's plight. This inability to set aside both views of the same circumstances causes challenges when working together to solve them. As a result, we are faced with the dilemma regarding how or when intervention is needed, and whose view needs corrected. Do we always satisfy what the disadvantaged want, even when the decision fails to be supported from the view of the privileged? Or do we trust the privileged to intercede on behalf of the disadvantaged because their view of their circumstances is leading them to make bad choices? To simplify our dilemma, is it better to satisfy the wants, desires, and choices of the disadvantaged, or to challenge them to make better choices through interventions by the privileged?

Here, philosophical discipline intercedes, and a utilitarian view of our challenge emerges; people's happiness matters. The theory of utility states that actions are right when they support happiness and wrong when they prevent happiness. As a result, if a disadvantaged person really believes a choice will increase their happiness, then it must be honored. Given our dilemma, it should



be noted that under the utilitarian view happiness is equal between persons. Therefore, we should not prioritize the happiness of the privileged over the disadvantaged. As a result, the happiness of the disadvantaged should be a factor in deciding how to help them. Though, connecting our discussion of the disadvantaged choices to happiness might seem a challenge. Here we turn to traditional philosophical thought on the theory known as the greatest happiness theory – or theory of utility – to explain how choices and happiness are connected.

John Stuart Mill<sup>6</sup> is one of the most influential supporters of utilitarianism. In his work, “The Subjection of Women,”<sup>7</sup> Mill defends the right of a person to find happiness for themselves on their terms. “To allow to any human beings no existence of their own but what depends on others is giving are too high a premium on bending others to their purposes” (Mill 98). Here we understand that the theory of utility supports the disadvantaged in making their own choices and living their lives as they choose. This is because it is asking too much of the disadvantaged to bend to the will of the privileged. Further, this reluctance to allow others to compel the disadvantaged to choices not of their own making is a way to support the disadvantaged in living a self-determined (autonomous) life.

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<sup>6</sup> John Stuart Mill was a utilitarian who supports the view of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. As a result, he would challenge the abdication of the disadvantaged’s choices to the privileged because each person deserves to determine for themselves how to attain their happiness.

<sup>7</sup> This essay is especially profound, due to its support for the independence of women from the ties of the patriarchy. This notable work was written in 1861 and is especially relevant today, since those who live in poverty and have a disadvantaged status are more often women than men.

It seems our dilemma has been made a bit more complicated regarding intervention efforts. This is because intervention is not just about deciding for the disadvantaged what is best for them, it is also deciding when we have grounds to challenge or deny their autonomy and happiness. The greater question, though, seems to be whether helping the disadvantaged get what they want helps them.

## 2. Preference Utilitarianism and Aiding the Disadvantaged

As mentioned above, utilitarians support the greatest happiness principle. However, basing a theory of intervention on happiness seems challenging. After all, happiness can mean different things to different people. I might be most happy if I were to get a new car. You might be most happy to get a raise. Happiness is subjective and determined by the person seeking it. As a result, some utilitarians think that the good is constituted by people getting what they want, and so the right action is the one that satisfies the most and strongest preferences. Those that view preferences in this way are preference utilitarians. So with this view, if I want a new car, then it is good when I get a new car.

However, I might be in a situation where even though I want a new car, I cannot get a new car. If I then choose to decorate my room (as a result of my inability to get a car), it would be wrong to say that I preferred my second choice in the same way that I did my first (the car). What is important here, is that a second-best choice does not mean that it was desired or wanted. It was merely a choice that I had available to me and was attainable. As a result, it is then right to

say that I still prefer the car, even as I embrace my new room. Further still, it is also fair to point out that I didn't get what I wanted, instead I got something else. The preference utilitarian would point out that what matters in this instance is that what I wanted and what I got did not match.

A robust defense of preference utilitarianism has been presented by Harriet Baber.<sup>8</sup> In her paper "Adaptive Preferences," she states that "Preference 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" (Baber 106). This statement makes clear that the idea that what is best for a person is based on what *that person* determined they wanted.

As a result, in our dilemma regarding the privileged and the disadvantaged, the preference utilitarian would support giving the disadvantaged what they wanted. But, what should we do when people don't want what's best for them? The preference utilitarian view challenges us to accept these preferences and to fulfill them – even when they are harmful. As a result, instances where the disadvantaged want things that are not good for them prove to be difficult cases for the preference utilitarian.

The preference utilitarian would remind us, though, that the only thing that matters is that a person's preferences are fulfilled and not the circumstances

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<sup>8</sup> Harriet Baber is a philosopher recognized for her work in feminist philosophy and the philosophy of economics.

surrounding them (Baber 108). This does not deny that a disadvantaged existence is plagued with bad circumstances, that they often have little accurate information, or that they may cause themselves harm. Instead, while these factors matter, they don't have the effect one might expect on choice.

Here is how the preference utilitarian escapes this challenge. Let's revisit our car example from above. If I want a new car and get a new car, then this is good. Similarly, if I want clean water and get clean water, then this is also good. It doesn't matter that my circumstances compelled me to want clean water. Instead, what matters is what I wanted and that I got it. Of course, if my situation changed, I might want a garden in my village. Again, what would matter is getting the garden. To reiterate what was said earlier, regarding second choices or third or more, it doesn't matter if I get a newly decorated bedroom (or anything else) instead of the car. I wanted the car. Likewise, it doesn't matter how dire my circumstances, I can still decide that I want something and still look for it to happen. And I can consider it good when I receive it. When my preferences are satisfied, it is good for me. And when my I don't get what I want, it isn't good. Therefore, what I deem to be good is the key to the utilitarian view.

However, it is important to consider whether a true preference is anything I want for myself with no caveats. The only restriction the preference utilitarian would assert is that preferences cannot be ascribed to me that are not my own. As Baber explains, my true preferences can be identified by a lack of coercion, understanding the facts of the matter, and are not desired due to my duty to others (Baber 107). Therefore, if no one ordered me to get a garden (coercion),

and I understood that a garden was feasible (information), and I didn't feel like I should want a garden because others wanted one (duty to others) – then my desire for a garden is my true preference.

Given our dilemma regarding the disadvantaged, the preference utilitarian offers to them important benefits. The first is the ability to be recognized as “rational choosers”, despite their difficult circumstances (Baber 126). The second benefit is that this means that the disadvantaged should get what they want, even if the privileged would want something different. Under this view, the disadvantaged's choices matter most. Preference utilitarianism also explains that if the choices of the disadvantaged are troubling that they simply need better options.

Even with all these benefits, one could still rightly question if the circumstances of the disadvantaged can be dismissed so easily. It seems that someone's disadvantaged state, and the challenges that come with it, deserve more consideration than the preference utilitarian grants them.

### 3. Adaptive Preferences

There are philosophers who answer a resounding “No” when it comes to the dismissal of circumstances and their effect on choice-making. This is because a person's circumstances limit their available options. In other words, one cannot expect to have their wish for clean water to be met, if no clean water is available – and there seems to be something very wrong with choosing to drink

dirty water even as a second choice. Further, if a person was never made aware that water could be clean, a person couldn't want it, let alone expect to get it. As a result, preference utilitarianism can be challenged by those concerned with adaptive preferences; preferences adapted by circumstance.

John Elster<sup>9</sup> characterized adaptive preferences as *unconscious* preferences that are formed when people downgrade their options and instead seek those that are attainable to them (Khader 46). This is most often discussed as the fox and the grapes scenario. A fox struggles to reach grapes but cannot. As a result, instead of striving for the grapes, he determines that they are poisonous. This causes the fox no longer to reach for the desired grapes and instead he opts to reach for what is more easily attainable or nonpoisonous. However, because the fox *unconsciously* rejects seeking the grapes, it is still possible that the fox (should the grapes become available) would reach for them again.

An important distinction is that Elster considers this process *unconscious*. Under Elster's characterization there is no conscious second choice-making process, instead the person making the choice simply defers to what is attainable and views it as their choice. This is done without considering what a first choice might have been. In fact, the person may not even be aware that there was ever another choice. Though, because Elster favors the fox and the grapes model of adaptation, he is skeptical of changes that are necessitated by circumstances.

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<sup>9</sup> Jon Elster is a political theorist whose work focuses on the philosophy of social sciences and theories of individual and group choice.

One would have to be aware of this process to include circumstances as relevant. Unfortunately, this unconscious process (of reaching for the grapes, deferring, and being open to them again) also makes adaptive preferences unstable and irrational (Cudd).

Yet, Martha Nussbaum<sup>10</sup> disagrees with this account of adaptive preferences. Instead she asserts that adaptation occurs when a person “adjust[s] their desires to the way of life they know” (Symposium 78). With respect to preferences, this means that a person will desire or prefer those things that they are familiar with *and* believe to be accessible. As a result, certain options will fail to be considered because they were never experienced or believed to be possible. After all, there is no use striving for things out of reach or unattainable; instead one must adapt to what is possible given their circumstances. For example, if I know that I am short, then I am unlikely to pursue becoming a flight attendant. Similarly, if I have no understanding that germs cause me to become sick, then I might believe that cold weather makes me ill.

Nussbaum claims that the case of Jayamma is an example of her view of adaptive preferences:

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<sup>10</sup> Martha Nussbaum is a prominent social and political philosopher whose work on the Capabilities Approach (focusing on human development and welfare) has won her numerous awards and accolades.

Jayamma defends a woman's right to safety but fails to see her financial mistreatment both at work and at home. At work, Jayamma, and other women are paid less and endure heavier work. Even when she was denied a promotion, she simply accepted this as fact. There was no emotional labor or protest invested on her part. And when her husband took earnings and wasted them on non-necessities, while she financially provided for the children and did all the housework, she responded no differently. This is simply how things were and how they would continue. Unfortunately, Jayamma, both failed to recognize herself as a being with rights and the concept that she had been wronged (Symposium 69).

In this example, Jayamma failed to recognize her suffering and that she had rights as a human being. And she failed to help herself or advocate for her own fair treatment, in fact she did not react to her suffering at all.

As demonstrated here, there are shifts in the characterization of adaptive preferences, even among philosophers.<sup>11</sup> Elster required that adaptation be an unconscious response to the available options, while rejecting adaptations to circumstances, and deeming preference adaptation unstable and irrational. In contrast, Nussbaum asserts that those with adaptive preferences adapt their desires based on the way of life that they know.

The challenge of accepting adaptive preferences, however, is to question the rationality of the disadvantaged: they are at best unconscious of the process where they adapt their preferences and at worst mentally damaged to the extent

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<sup>11</sup> We cannot discuss all views of adaptive preferences here. However, one would be remiss not to mention the work of Nussbaum, Baber, Harsanyi, Sen, Elster, Bartky, Cudd, Dworkin, Daly, McKinnon, and Sommers regarding adaptive preferences. If including related work, though, the list is nearly endless.



that their harm goes unrecognized by them. Given this understanding of adaptive preference, it does not seem surprising that in our dilemma of who is better positioned to help the poor, we now have an argument that supports the intervention of the privileged into the choice-making of the disadvantaged.

If one accepts that the disadvantaged have adaptive preferences, then it is appropriate to claim that the disadvantaged often don't know what is good for them or that they are too broken to object to what is bad for them. Either way, the privileged won't really be helping the disadvantaged if they give them what the privileged want.

#### 4. Critiquing Adaptive Preferences

Suppose we look at preferences in a different light. What if preferences not only help us get something that we prefer but that they can also help us get closer to something that we prefer when it is not available. In other words, what if preferences are merely a step in the direction of what is truly desired or wanted, instead of the end of what is truly preferred. It seems reasonable to say that in the absence of getting something that is wanted, persons might choose to get something that approximates what is preferred or that brings us closer to what is truly preferred. About the disadvantaged and their dire circumstances (where choices are few), it seems reasonable to think that if they could not get what they wanted, then they would try to find an option that brings them closer to what they

preferred. If the disadvantaged use their preferences as means to an end, it would also follow that these preferences will be adaptive.

Let us refer to *means-preferences* as those preferences that shift with circumstances and adapt, but that also bring the disadvantaged closer to what they truly intrinsically care about. If there are means-preferences, though, then there should be end-preferences. For our purposes, let's define *end-preferences* as those things that people stably value. This means that when a person makes a choice, what they are responding to is the value that choice offers. With this view of preferences, we can now see how some of the challenging choices of the disadvantaged might merely reflect a means-preference and not an end-preference.

Now suppose that a person chose to live in their car rather than accept public assistance for housing. While speaking with them, we learn that they reject all forms of assistance and instead they speak of solving their problems by themselves. Here the choice to live in their car would be the means-preference, while autonomy/freedom is the end-preference. When we understand the relationship of means- and end-preferences, we discover that there may be many ways to address this person's value of autonomy.

It is now possible, therefore, to understand that sometimes the privileged might rightly reject the means-preferences of the disadvantaged in favor of a different solution. After all, it does not have to be the case that a person's first choice means-preference is their best choice. And since means-preferences

might be adapted anyway, there is no harm in showing the disadvantaged a better solution, but only if their end-preference is not ignored.

It should be clear that for the privileged discussing or negotiating with the disadvantaged various ways to change their most deeply held values (end-preferences) isn't a worthy endeavor. What a person values due to their circumstances is likely valued because of necessity and not because of want. It would not be right to say that a person should not value safety in lieu of freedom or freedom in lieu of safety when circumstances dictate otherwise. And as you might imagine, attempts to persuade persons away from what they deeply value is rightfully difficult. As a result, should the privileged fail to consider the end-preferences of the disadvantaged, they won't be able to help them.

About value, it is right to say that people can and do value multiple things. While people's values are stable and deeply held, their relative priority to each other can shift. Like our example above, a person who values the security their job offers may acknowledge that their future opportunities are limited. If offered a new position with advancement opportunities, they may now deprioritize their desire for security and opt to accept the position on offer.

It is tempting to refer to this reprioritization of values as an adaptive value theory. However, we must choose carefully how we explain what has been identified here. What we have identified is a significant prioritization shift that reflects how important a value is as determined by circumstance, not whether it has altogether ceased to matter. Further, no new values were established either. There is a second concern worth noting, regarding whether to refer to this

reprioritization as something adaptive. As noted above, the word *adaptive* has been chosen by adaptive preference theorists and carries a pejorative tone due to their work. Considering this, referring to my view as an adaptive value approach would also carry the same pejorative connotation of adaptive preference views, which I reject.

I will refer to this process, therefore, as *appropriately adaptive re-evaluations*. To summarize, *appropriately adaptive re-evaluations* refer to a shift in how important a value is to a person in relation to the other values held by them. These are considered appropriate because changes in circumstances rightly causes a person to re-evaluate their situation; this is rational. This view is adaptive because both improvements and deteriorations in our circumstances trigger shifts in prioritizing our values. And this process is considered a re-evaluation because no new values are established, nor have any ceased to matter.

At this point an example is needed to demonstrate how the appropriately adaptive re-evaluation view works in practice. Let's consider the circumstances of a person from the LGBTQIA+<sup>12</sup> community who lives in a society where being 'out' is unsafe. It seems reasonable, then, that this person, in order to protect their safety, hides their sexuality from being discovered. Here, the member of the community has prioritized their safety over their freedom.

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<sup>12</sup> This acronym refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersex, androgynous, and others (including those without a category or group affiliation).

As a result of this prioritization, this person may choose to dress differently, carry a weapon, become reclusive, fail to apply for aid for fear of being 'outed' or documented as 'one of them,' or even change their name (in the case of being transgender). As a result of prioritizing safety over freedom (and other deeply held values), any interventions designed to help this person will be rejected by them, if those interventions do not ensure (as much as possible) their safety. Further, any attempts to convince this person to 'come out' would similarly be rejected.

While conventional philosophical thought focuses on the choices of the disadvantaged, my view recognizes that there is a deep value that this person is seeking in their choices. This person isn't choosing between how to dress or what their name should be; instead they are prioritizing their safety and making choices accordingly. As a result, under my view, it is appropriate to refer to the preferences of a name change, dressing differently, or carrying a weapon as means-preferences with safety as the end-preference.

Should the person we've discussed move to an area where it is safe to be 'out,' it is reasonable for them to realize that they are now safe. As a result, they are now able to shift their values and reprioritize their freedom over their safety. Therefore, those choices that represent freedom would now be embraced. These new choices are still means-preferences which support the re-prioritized value (end-preference) of freedom.

Further, in this sketch it would be right to say that what is valued by the straight members of this (same) society may be completely different. They may

neither prioritize their safety (since they are safe), and they may not value freedom (since their freedom may not be restricted). That does not mean, however, that they do not value those things. Nor does it mean their choices don't support their values in the same way as the disadvantaged. Instead, a straight person in the same society may, for example, value financial security. In that case, their means-preferences (choices) will support their desired end-preference of financial security.

In both cases, the privileged and disadvantaged use the same process. What might look to be a poor choice by the disadvantaged is instead a rational value prioritization process that the privileged also use.

## 5. Aid

In the previous section, we discussed end-preferences and means-preferences to sort out what the disadvantaged prefer in comparison to what they value. In the process, we found the connection between the two types of preferences and explained how means-preferences help to satisfy the end-preference (value). Further, we recognized that every person adapts their values and reprioritizes them to fit their circumstances. And we referred to this process as appropriately adaptive re-evaluations. What we have not discussed at length, given this new understanding, is what the privileged should do to help the disadvantaged.

In order to help the disadvantaged, the privileged must ensure that any help offered to the disadvantaged is targeted to what they value most: their end-preferences. This is because end-preferences are stably held but are also indicative of the circumstances in which the disadvantaged live. The privileged, therefore, must consider these values as inviolable end-preferences. Further, attempts to modify the deeply held values of another can deeply damage the relationship between those persons. And when it comes to convincing the disadvantaged to trust the privileged, trust is required. Therefore, only regarding end-preferences, the preference utilitarian is correct, we should give the disadvantaged what they prefer.

Means-preferences require different handling than end-preferences; this is because these preferences adapt to circumstance and are not stably held. As a result, the privileged have grounds to challenge these, since there may be more than one way to respond to the values the disadvantaged are seeking. Also, some of the means-preferences may not benefit the disadvantaged in the way that they had hoped. For instance, a disadvantaged person who has recently been released from a treatment program or prison may choose to live with others who were released prior. Though this choice (by all appearances) is supportive and beneficial, the absence of a stable person living in the house challenges all who live there to remain out of trouble and to recover.

As a result, additional suggestions or ideas should be offered by the privileged to aid the disadvantaged, but only if the new suggestions do not challenge or violate the disadvantaged's end-preferences. Because of the nature

of means-preferences, therefore, intervention is warranted. As a result, we can in this instance only, accept that the adaptive preference theorist is correct – sometimes intervention is warranted because the disadvantaged's means-preferences might not help them as they had hoped. And while it is acceptable to allow for intervention there is no reason to accept a view of the disadvantaged as mentally damaged or broken.

While intervention is a justifiable reaction when damning circumstances cause undue challenges to the disadvantaged, it cannot be the case that every preference or desire should be interrupted or hindered by the privileged. This is because a person's happiness does matter to them and it is difficult to be pleased with a life lived on the terms of others. The privileged should cautioned, therefore, against depriving disadvantaged persons of their autonomy any more than necessary. On these grounds we also find ourselves supporting both the basic utilitarian principle of happiness and autonomy.

Therefore, my view of preferences as means- and end-preferences, along with appropriately adaptive re-evaluations have allowed us to keep the best of each of the preference theories we have discussed. We have maintained the autonomy of the disadvantaged and their right to a happy life on their terms, we have supported fulfilling end-preferences because they are deeply and stably held values, and we have allowed for intervention insofar as there is no violation of the disadvantaged's end-preferences. We have also defended the right of the disadvantaged to live life on their own terms.



Let's consider a case often cited in philosophical literature; the case of an abused woman named Vasanti. Martha Nussbaum introduces us to her dilemma in the following way:

Vasanti stayed in an abusive marriage and only left after her husband had a vasectomy. This is because she believed that while abuse was bad, that it was also simply a part of a woman's life – to leave her home and be with her husband even if there is violence. She had no idea that there were laws against this behavior, or that she (and women) had rights to protect them from such harm. While this may seem unbelievable to some, many women believe this to be the case. "... There is something wrong with the preference (if we should call it that) to put up with abuse..." (Symposium 69).

As noted by Nussbaum, Vasanti's choice may or may not be referred to as an adaptive preference. However, there is something wrong with Vasanti's willingness to stay in her abusive marriage. Here the preference utilitarian responds that if there is a problem with Vasanti's decision to stay, that she needed better choices. In the absence of those better choices, Vasanti had a right to choose what she needed to do given her circumstances. The adaptive preference theorist would insist that intervention was needed due to her choice to remain in an abusive marriage. At this point we have arrived at the expected dilemma; do we support Vasanti's free choice to remain with her husband despite her abuse, or do we intervene on Vasanti's behalf?

My view allows for both. Once we identify Vasanti's end-preference (providing for potential children) then we can offer solutions that address her means-preference for remaining in her abusive marriage. What is not permitted

under my view is finding a way to justify her choice to stay, nor devaluing her prioritization of providing for her future children. Instead, we can recognize that providing for future children is a worthy value and that the choice to remain (which supports that value) must be helped. Now that Vasanti has left her abusive husband, she will re-evaluate the ordering of her values to match her newly found freedom. Though she may in fact still value stability for potential children (it was her husband who had the vasectomy), she won't value it more than her safety.

## 6. Objection

Let's return to our opening example and revisit Sally's preference for living in her car. Using an end- and means- view of preferences, Sally must have a means-preference that is adaptable and an end-preference that is stable. If we look at the dialogue that began this work, we are drawn to the following statements shared about Sally's choices:

“Sally repeatedly insists that she's proud that she's never accepted help from anyone. She'd be the first one to tell you that she's never been on welfare, never taken a hand-out, never begged, and never leaned on the government. Oddly, her face lights up with pride as she recounts these achievements.”

If we look closely at the words used in this example, Sally reveals that she values her autonomy beyond all other things. We arrive at this conclusion based on the

following: she's proud that she's never accepted help, she shares that she has never accepted any help, and she considers these to be achievements. Clearly, her independence matters to her, and because it does, this should be recognized as her end-preference. However, her means-preference of living in her car is what first drew our attention. As a result, it would be right for the privileged to intervene and offer other solutions to living in her car.

We can now see that the interventions suggested to Sally must not violate her end-preference of autonomy. Given these criteria, interventions must be presented as maximizing the attainment of her end-preference. Therefore, subsidized housing must be presented in such a way that Sally can see that she could remain autonomous while accepting the help that has been offered. If Sally rejects all types of subsidized housing, however, the privileged should consider what options might be available that support her autonomy. Through these methods, it is now possible for the privileged to assist Sally in ways that will truly help her.

Some may object, however, that it is not possible to interview every person to determine their end-preferences. This would indeed be troubling, especially regarding global initiatives intended to help the disadvantaged. My response, though, is that this concern overcomplicates intervention in ways that are not needed. No one needs to interview every disadvantaged person to understand their individual values. Instead, the privileged should look for common values among the disadvantaged in similarly related circumstances. After all, circumstances are what trigger the appropriately adaptive re-evaluation

process. So those in similar situations are likely to have the same or similar value priorities. What at first appears to be a challenge is the greatest benefit of my view of preferences: that by focusing on end-preferences, the privileged can help groups of similarly disadvantaged people. If Sally, who is homeless and living in her car, values her autonomy, then it is likely that others like Sally (who live in the same society) also value their autonomy.

As a result, my view of preferences and the corresponding appropriately adaptive re-evaluation process are also globally relevant. This is because end-preference (value) recognition can be applied to other societies and cultures. Consider, Jayamma who did not recognize or protest her financial mistreatment by both her boss and her husband. Here, my view of preferences would regard Jayamma's lack of protest as a means-preference while her end-preference would need to be determined. Upon learning her end-preference, interventions can be suggested to address her means-preferences that also do not violate her end preferences. Still, we have crossed the globe to India with the necessary understanding to help Jayamma.

## 7. Conclusion

When philosophers talk about preferences, they talk about the choices that were made. Of course, if somebody chooses between A or B it is understood that B offered something to them that A didn't. When we talk about adding value to the preference debate, we are talking about the value that puts one choice

above another. This explains why sometimes the most difficult and challenging choices – the ones that ultimately seem counterintuitive or harmful to us by others – are based on values. As philosophers we should not simply talk about whether a person preferred A or B, but also how and why they preferred either option. And to do this, we must discuss choices as being the means to an end – the value that is being sought.

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