

Adaptations to Oppression: Preference and Resistance¹

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I. Introduction: Preferences and their place in moral and political philosophy

Why do we care about what people prefer? There are at least three categories of *prima facie* reasons. Liberals care about people getting what they want because they choose it. Preference is seen as connected to liberty. Utilitarians care about peoples' preferences because preference is seen as related to utility. Getting what we want seems to make us happy. More broadly, welfarist consequentialist theories tie preference to well-being because it is generally thought to raise persons' well-being to get what they prefer. Each of these connections depends on a tight connection between something and preference satisfaction: freedom or autonomy and preference satisfaction for the liberal, utility and preference satisfaction for the classical utilitarian, wellbeing and preference satisfaction for the (welfarist) consequentialist.² In each case, however, preferences for immoral ends are not seen as worthy of being satisfied. In addition to the morality of the ends, there may be perfectionist worries or worries about harms to self or others.

These connections between preferences and what the theory takes to be morally significant may be broken under some circumstances. First there are epistemic problems that sever the connection between what state an agent thinks she prefers and what actually comes from satisfying that preference. The agent may have incomplete information about the full

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² Even many non-welfarist theories, such as the capabilities theories of Nussbaum and Sen, take persons' preferences to be morally significant, even if not constituting overriding reasons for individuals or society to see to it that preferences are satisfied.

description of the state or how the state will be experienced once it is achieved. Or there may be unexpected changes in the agent's circumstances, such that by the time the preference is satisfied it is no longer desirable to the agent. Second, there can be character problems that compromise the link between preference and the morally significant things, such as weakness of will, where an agent prefers something in the short run but not as a part of an overall plan for life. Third, there are potential moral problems, both self-regarding and other-regarding, with preferences. Preferences can be for states that allow the agent less freedom in the future, which is clearly problematic if satisfying the preferences puts the agent in a situation where she cannot satisfy her future preferences. Finally, preferences are morally problematic if their satisfaction harms others.³

In this latter context I want to examine adaptive preferences, and in particular those adaptive preferences which form in reaction to oppressive social conditions. Feminists have explored how adaptive preferences, sometimes pejoratively termed "deformed desires"⁴ in the context of oppression, reinforce the conditions that reduce freedom for themselves and others in their oppressed social group.⁵ Some recent preference theorists have attempted to show that adaptive preferences are not problematic for the agent who has them or for society.⁶ Such a view would reduce the imperative to change oppressive conditions whenever the oppressed have become resigned or adapted to living in unjust conditions of lack of freedom and opportunity. In

³ I use the term "problematic" to signal a prima facie worry rather than the pro tanto judgment that satisfaction of such preferences are "proscribed" in order to imply significance in preference type for both utilitarians and liberals. All in, the utilitarian may argue that preferences that harm others should still be satisfied, of course.

⁴ Anita Superson, "Deformed Desires and Informed Desires Tests," *Hypatia*, 20(2005): 109-126. I am using the term "deformed desires" in her sense to signify only those adaptive preferences that are caused by oppression.

⁵ Among those who argue this are Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, Oxford, 2000; Ann E. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, Oxford, 2006; Sandrine Berges, "Why Women Hug their Chains: Wollstonecraft and Adaptive Preferences," *Utilitas*, 23 (2011): 72-87; Ann Levey, "Liberalism, Adaptive Preferences, and Gender Equality," *Hypatia*, 20(2005): 127-143; and Serene Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*, Oxford, 2011.

⁶ Donald Bruckner, "In Defense of Adaptive Preferences," *Philosophical Studies*, 142(2009): 307-324; Harriet Baber, "Adaptive Preference," *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol, 33, No, 1 (January 2007): 105-126.

this paper I will defend the view that adaptive preferences that are caused by oppressive circumstances are problematic for morality and justice. Deformed desires are problematic not only because they sever the connection between autonomy and preference, as feminists have noted, but also, and more importantly because they harm others. As a result we can derive an obligation to resist such preferences and a *prima facie* reason to intervene to change the preferences that reinforce oppression.

II. Defining adaptive preferences

Defining adaptive preferences is inevitably a partly normative project; adaptive preference is a moralized concept because it picks out preferences that have been formed in a way that makes those preferences suspect. Adaptive preferences are preferences that adapt or adjust to changes in the agent's feasible set of possible states of affairs, but do so in a way that we would find somehow psychologically or morally problematic. We will know that we have a good definition when we pick out a kind that can be clearly distinguished from other kinds of preferences, but also that identifies a psychological, moral, or political problem with those preferences. Jon Elster first named adaptive preferences in the context of discussing freedom and autonomy. Preferences that we are caused to have, but do not intentionally choose to form, because our freedom has been constrained are, he reasoned, non-autonomous. For Elster the paradigmatic example of adaptive preference formation is the story of the fox who, when he found that he could not reach the grapes that he wanted, changed his preference, declaring the grapes to be sour. In Elster's view the characteristics of adaptive preferences that make them non-autonomous changes in preference are (1) the change is in response to a (perceived) constriction of the feasible set, that is, the set of states of affairs that the agent could feasibly

bring about, and (2) the change happens not as a result of intentional planning of one's character, but rather by an "essentially" unconscious process that happens "behind the back" of the agent.⁷

In Elster's view, the nature of the process of change is really more important than the constriction of the feasible set; as long as one intentionally chooses to change one's preferences, then the change does not compromise freedom. So if the fox were to say to himself, 'the grapes are out of my reach, so I am going to cultivate a taste for berries that I can reach and convince myself that I like them better than grapes,' then Elster would not classify such a change as an "adaptive preference" change in the sense that he claims compromises autonomy. Elster offers a test of adaptive preferences that allows us to tell the difference between those that come about by an irrational process and those that are permanent, planned character changes. If the preference change would reverse were the feasible set to be enlarged again to include the state that is now dispreferred, then the change is a problematic adaptive preference. But if the preference change would remain intact after the feasible set was enlarged to include the dispreferred state, then the change is to be considered a rational character planning process. So, for example, once I realized that I did not have the physical gifts to become a star athlete, I became more interested in philosophy and came to realize that intellectual activities gave me deep and lasting pleasure. If I now were endowed with those physical gifts, I would not choose to devote my life to athletic pursuits, but would still prefer the life of the mind. This is a change that involved learning and cultivation of the talents that I found I had, but it is a permanent change in my preferences and so a rational, non-adaptive one. If society is arranged to encourage such character planning, say by inviting only the gifted athletes to sports camps, it is not freedom-denying.

While Elster's preference reversal test is a good one for preference changes that are motivated by restrictions of one's feasible set that result from either natural obstacles or social

⁷ Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes*, Cambridge, 1983, 117.

ones that come from just social conditions, it does not fit when the change results from oppressive social conditions. Suppose, for example, that the story above really is that women were not permitted to be athletes because that pursuit was considered to be immodest for women, and so the preference change I described above happened. Now apply the preference reversal test, and suppose that my preferences still do not reverse.⁸ I would now say that this preference change was coerced, and that is morally problematic. That is, if permanent character changes are made in response to oppressive social conditions, it does not matter that the changes are permanent. In fact, it seems somewhat worse to me if they are permanent! The oppressive social conditions have warped my sense of the good, making me into someone other than who I might otherwise be. Furthermore, why should we only be concerned about *changes* in preferences? If the process by which preferences are induced in persons are coercive and unjust, which amounts to an adaptation to oppression, then the preferences are also morally problematic. Thus, I want to argue that Elster is not correct to say that adaptive preferences have to be changes made by unconscious causal processes in order to be suspect from the perspective of freedom.

Elster claims that adaptive preferences arise from an internal, unconscious process. This differs from manipulation by others, which is to him a clear case of external coercion, or character planning by the self, because he thought that such a process had to be autonomy enhancing or at least autonomy preserving for the person. “I am not arguing that character planning *ipso facto* makes for autonomy, but surely it could never detract from it.”⁹ Elster is concerned about autonomy, but in my view he fails to see how autonomy can be compromised

⁸ Perhaps it seems implausible that my preferences would not reverse if the oppressive social conditions of oppression were removed and they were the causes of the apparent preference. But there are empirical examples, such as the Muslim women immigrants who move to non-Muslim nations and insist that they still *prefer* to wear hijab in order to express feminine modesty (though, of course, some do so for other reasons), even when doing so is optional or even outlawed.

⁹ Elster, *op.cit.*, 138.

by oppressive social conditions through the rational responses of victims to their conditions. Feminist concerns about adaptive preferences suggest a different way of drawing distinctions than Elster does. The problematic preferences for feminists are preferences of the oppressed that are morally problematic for the oppressed. These are the adaptive preferences that are preferences caused by oppressive conditions and are for states that reinforce those conditions. Let's call these "preferences that are adaptations to and for oppression," or PAOs for short. Even so, it is a contentious matter to show how just how adaptive preferences are morally problematic for the oppressed.

Several theorists have pointed out that adaptive preferences cannot be morally problematic simply because they are formed by an unconscious process since most of our desires come about through unconscious processes that we find unobjectionable, such as the normal process of learning in early life.¹⁰ Another proposal for why PAO's are morally suspect is because they are not the agents' authentic preferences. So they compromise the agency or autonomy of the ones who have them.¹¹ Let us first take the proposal that they compromise agency. This is to say that the oppressed are not fully rational agents, or not really voluntarily acting when they choose to satisfy adaptive preferences. But to portray the people in this way is to portray them as mere "dupes."¹² While there may well be those who have been duped by oppressive circumstances, the examples that some feminists have offered have been criticized by others who have shown that most adult women living under oppressive circumstances are in fact better described as making the best of their situation by choosing within the social norms that they take as given. As Uma Narayan puts it, they are better described as "bargaining with

¹⁰ Lisa Fuller, ;Nussbaum, 2000; Levey, 2005.; Khader, 2011.

¹¹ Those who hold some version of this view include Superson, Nussbaum, Levey.

¹² Uma Narayan, 2002. "Minds of Their Own: Choices, Autonomy, Cultural Practices, and Other Women." In *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. Louise M. Antony and Charlotte E. Witt, Westview Press, 2nd edition, 418-432.

patriarchy,” making voluntary, preference maximizing choices within their constraints.

Examining a particular example of Sufi Pirzada women, she argues that they are even keenly aware of the injustice of the patriarchal nature of these social constraints, and choose to work within them because that is their best option (objectively considered, arguably). They take such injustice as one of the fixed features of their environment which they must choose within. If the oppressed can be so characterized, they are better seen as acting rationally, shrewdly, with full agency, and not as mere dupes.

PAOs thus should not be characterized as problematic because they compromise agency. What about autonomy? I want to argue that PAO's are typically non-autonomous preferences, but not (or at least not only) because of the nature of the preferences or the way that they have been formed. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop a theory of autonomy and defend it, but it is crucial for me to indicate the type of theory that I support. I find the most plausible theory to be a substantive, relational theory, which requires that agents have adequate social freedoms as well as the internal capacities and skills to make use of them. By adequate social freedoms I mean that basic material needs are satisfied and that there is the basis for each person to live a dignified life as a moral equal with others. Among other things this requires that one not face categorical exclusion or discrimination based on arbitrary, ascribed social group status. Autonomy requires that one rationally plan one's life and live according to a moral code that one can see reasons for. Social circumstances can be so constraining that they rule this out, if one has to live an immoral life in order to survive, given the options one has. Somewhat less constraining options that make it difficult to resist wrongdoing are not autonomy supporting social conditions. Thus, on this view persons' autonomy can be compromised by their social circumstances. Autonomy is thus both a social and an individual achievement.

Serene Khader criticizes the view that adaptive preferences represent autonomy deficits in the agent who has such preferences. She first argues that adaptive preferences are not procedural autonomy deficits. Since this is not my view, I will pass over this part of her argument. Khader then argues that adaptive preferences are not substantive autonomy deficits. While she provides good reasons to reject some versions of substantive autonomy, the view that substantive autonomy is thwarted by accepting oppressive social norms withstands her critique. The primary reason she rejects that view is that such a view of autonomy would recommend morally objectionable strategies for preference transformation by encouraging people to abandon their existing systems of value, and such strategies are illiberal and condescending. By recommending that she abandon her values, they seem to blame the victim for her plight. Khader's critique applies to my view because I argue that oppressive societies compromise autonomy. First societies that fail to provide social freedom because they are oppressive would clearly fail to support autonomy. Second, individuals living in cultures that do not treat some individuals as capable of living their lives according to their own plan and applying a reasonable moral code to their actions would also fail to allow autonomous action. Hence, my view entails that oppressive societies need reorientation to support autonomy, which may amount to abandoning existing systems of value. Khader's critique seems to me to be misguided. The problem with the argument, (a problem which also arises in the rejection of procedural views of autonomy), is that it derives a metaphysical conclusion from moral or pragmatic premises: because it is not legitimate/ effective/good to recommend that people abandon (aspects of) their cultures, it cannot be the case that adaptive preferences are non-autonomous. That is clearly fallacious. Furthermore, it begs the question of whether it is not legitimate or effective or good to recommend that people abandon aspects of their cultures.

However, that said, I do agree with Khader that non-autonomy should not be seen as *definitional* for PAO's. A useful definition of PAO's should point to their cause and indicate why they are morally problematic in every case. I would agree with Khader's observation that it is possible for people to have adaptive preferences and still be autonomous in some sense for some decisions, despite their oppressive circumstances.¹³ I propose that we define the class of adaptive preferences that she and I are interested in, namely PAO's, as those preferences that are caused by adaptation (whether planned or unplanned, conscious or unconscious) to oppressive circumstances that restrict the feasible set for the oppressed group. This definition indicates the cause of the preferences, (adaptation to oppression), and why they are problematic. Furthermore, the definition points to the social circumstances as the root cause, not the individuals who have the preferences, and so it avoids victim-blaming.

Ann Levey argues that adaptive preferences (where she, too, is interested primarily in PAO's) sometimes result from an expansion of the feasible set, and this would seem to contradict my definition.¹⁴ She cites studies of women in North America showing that they enjoy domestic work, and argues that this preference has developed because of enhanced opportunities for women (as compared with men) to do that kind of work. Thus, it could be expansion of some options that cause the PAO's. I agree that some new opportunities arise as a result of oppressive social norms, but there are also restrictions of the feasible set. I believe that my definition still captures what is going on with the example better than her analysis. It is not the expanded opportunities but rather the fact that those opportunities look better than the other ones in the feasible set, a set that lacks opportunities that men have, that makes them attractive and causes the adaptation. Such expansions of options are not real expansions of freedom, but rather booby

¹³ Khader, 2011, ch. 3.

¹⁴ Levey, 2005.

prizes, like women being the beneficiary of the door opening ritual as a part of their being considered inferior to and thus in need of the protection and assistance of men. The feasible set is still restricted in crucial ways, namely in lacking those opportunities that would give women equal social power with men. These are arbitrary restrictions that are the result of invidious social discrimination.

Another worry about the definition is that it might be question begging if oppression is defined in terms of circumstances that give rise to adaptive preferences. Elizabeth Barnes objects to the use of adaptive preference to describe disabled people who come to prefer their disability to a life without it.¹⁵ She argues that there is no way to prove that a disabled life is less desirable than a life without disability without begging the question by assuming that such a life cannot be as desirable. But my definition of adaptive preference that relies on oppressive circumstances does not fall victim to this objection as long as we can define oppression separately from the fact that there are objectionable preferences involved. Since oppression involves many social distortions and states that are clearly dispreferred by the oppressed, it can be recognized separately from the alleged presence of adaptive preferences.¹⁶ Barnes would agree; she offers a criterion she calls “social warrant” for identifying adaptive preferences, according to which, “we are only warranted in diagnosing adaptive preference behavior in situations that represent some form of social distortion.”¹⁷ Thus, this definition of PAOs, an important subset of adaptive preferences for social and political philosophy, is not question-begging.

III. Why should we not satisfy or help people to satisfy PAO's?

¹⁵ Elizabeth Barnes, “Disability and Adaptive Preference,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23, Ethics, 2009: 1-22.

¹⁶ I provide an analysis of oppression separate from the definition of PAO's in *Analyzing Oppression*, Oxford, 2006.

¹⁷ Barnes, 2009, 13.

Some recent theorists have argued that adaptive preferences are acceptable preferences, and it is therefore best for society to help people get what they prefer. It will be worth examining why they think that adaptive preferences can be defended before I present my argument against them in the case of PAO's.

Harriet Baber argues that the adaptiveness of preferences is not morally important (a “red herring”) because either they are authentic preferences after all, or if they are not, then such preferences should be satisfied because the person is better off if they are.¹⁸ Again, I think that Baber is primarily concerned with the subset of adaptive preferences that I call PAO's, and so her view, at least in part, opposes mine. Some apparent preferences are inauthentic, she admits, because they are caused by brainwashing or a lack of information about alternatives. But such preferences should not be considered the actual preferences of such persons, since actual preferences require good information and sufficient time and ability to rationally consider what one really prefers. These cases are not like that, so in Baber's view they should not be termed preferences at all.

Another possibility for mere apparent adaptive preferences occurs when persons are making the best of their circumstances. But in this kind of case the questionable preference for x has to be construed as preference for x over y in presence of condition z, not for x over y in all conditions. For example, the woman who chooses not to go out of her home because she fears for her physical safety is preferring not to go out over going out in a situation where going out may well result in her being beaten. And this is not the same thing as preferring not going out over going out in a situation where she will be safe. So again, we cannot assume that the person actually has that preference, and hence not real adaptive preferences.

¹⁸ Baber, 2007.

Setting aside these cases in which the apparently adaptive preferences turn out to be not the agent's actual preferences, Baber argues that adaptive preferences, including PAOs, that are an agent's real preferences ought to be respected. She examines the case of Srey Mom, a prostitute who had been sold to a brothel as a child by her rural Cambodian parents. After Nicolas Kristof purchases her in order to return her to freedom in her home town, she returns to the brothel, apparently preferring life as a prostitute to that in her rural home. It may be that these are her real, authentic preferences, and that they are the result of adaptation to circumstances in which girls are often sold by their parents. In that case, Baber claims it is better that her preferences be respected, since it improves her welfare to get what she authentically wants. Baber admits that it is an empirical question whether this is a case of authentic preference rather than a preference for being a prostitute over living in her home village under the circumstances of oppression, when she would prefer living in the village without those circumstances. But let us suppose that it is the relatively low standard of living, and not female oppression that Srey Mom has reacted to in choosing to live as a prostitute in the city; even with the oppression of women, if there were as many consumer goods available in her home village, she would choose to live there rather than be a prostitute. It is still a PAO on my definition because the female oppression has still caused these preferences in the sense that they caused her to be sold into prostitution. This would be a case where according to Baber adaptive preferences should be respected because the agent has shown these to be her actual preferences, and it raises her welfare by satisfying them.

Baber offers one more case where she thinks adaptive preferences should be respected. Sometimes persons will express preferences for a state of affairs that appears adaptive to oppression out of a sense of commitment. According to Amartya Sen, this is not a preference at

all; acting out of commitment is at times counter-preferential.¹⁹ Whether or not this makes sense (and I have cast doubt on that elsewhere), it is clear that this is how many women who embrace the conditions of their oppression interpret their situation. For example, right wing Christian women, who express a preference for obeying their husbands when they would otherwise prefer a different action, explain their apparent preference as having religious commitment to do so. The commitment might be best understood as a belief, and hence a case of false consciousness. But such a case fits my definition of adaptive preference if we see this as preferring the commitment and what it entails and this commitment was caused by the conditions of their oppression. Baber holds that these adaptive preferences should be respected, presumably because they reflect actual commitments of rational agents.

Donald Bruckner agrees that adaptive preferences ought to be respected if they are a person's authentic preferences.²⁰ He does not restrict the causes of adaptive preferences to oppressive circumstances, but he does include adaptive preferences that have been caused by oppression as among those that should be seen in a favorable light. He writes, "in making the case in favor of adaptive preferences, I mean to be arguing in favor of their pursuit, in favor of their being normative for the agent who holds them."²¹ He offers a test for when we should favor pursuing the satisfaction of adaptive preferences: if the agent endorses the preference upon reflection, then regardless of the origin of the preference, it carries positive normative weight.²² One of Bruckner's cases is that of Yvonne, who is forced by her mother to help with traditional female chores and comes to prefer those activities over the traditional male activities that she

¹⁹ For a recent statement of his view on commitment as a counter-preferential motivation, see Amartya Sen, "Why exactly is Commitment Important for Rationality?" *Economics and Philosophy*, 21(2005): 5-14.

²⁰ Bruckner, 2009.

²¹ Bruckner, 2009, 312.

²² In Bruckner's use of the term, "normative force" or "weight" connotes giving an agent (defeasible) reasons for acting. This is how I shall use the term, as well.

does not get to experience as a child. Although he never puts it this way, I assume that Bruckner includes this example precisely because it is an example of internalized oppression, and so something of a hard case for his claim that such preferences have positive normative weight. On his account, as long as she reflectively endorses her preferences for traditional female over male activities, then these preferences are normatively valuable not only for Yvonne, but also as inputs into social decision making.

We now have three cases where adaptive preferences that are caused by oppression (what I call PAOs) are argued to be acceptable preferences, so that other things equal, we ought to pursue or support the pursuit of their satisfaction.

- ‘Actual’ preferences that are caused by oppressive circumstances, where the agent is making the best of a bad situation;
- Preferences for states that express a commitment to an oppressive ideology;
- Preferences that are caused by internalizing oppression, but on reflection and with full information about the oppressive condition, the agent endorses the preference.

In my view PAOs ought to be resisted and perhaps even changed, if doing so does not sacrifice something of even greater moral significance. These cases pose challenges to my view, and require me to argue that there is something wrong with the preferences such that they should not be given this normative presumption in their favor.

Let’s consider four problems with PAOs that can tell against giving them normative presumption. First, long run gains to resisting PAOs may outweigh the short run gains from their satisfaction. Consider Lisa, who, because of an oppressive stereotype about women as the domestic caregivers, adapts her preferences to preferring the domestic work of raising her children and supporting her husband but then is bereft when her children grow up and her family

moves on and she is left with no fulfilling activities. She, or some examples of her type, surely fit Baber's criteria of agents who have actual preferences for unpaid domestic work, and yet they later come to regret that they did not find outside work that would enable them to find a life beyond their children's childhood. Of course, not all examples of this type have these regrets. Furthermore, even if later they come to have these regrets, the same could be said for non-adaptive preferences for other risky outcomes. Sometimes we reject those preferences, such as when they are *akratic*, but sometimes we do not. If the preferences come out of a commitment to a higher principle, then we would not reject them. The reflective endorsement test rejects *akratic* preferences, but not these. So if these adaptive preferences ought to be rejected, then I need to find another argument for that.

The second problem that may arise with PAOs is that they reinforce the social circumstances that gave rise to them for the individual, further restricting her feasible set. Take the case of Lisa, the non-profit grant writer who quits her job when the first kid is born because her husband, Larry, has a higher paying job and they both prefer one parent to stay home with the children. Let's stipulate that the gendered wage gap as a manifestation of women's oppression is the root cause of the wage gap between Larry and Lisa.²³ Because he earns more, all things considered, she prefers being a stay at home mom. But this causes her human capital to deteriorate over time, which means that in the future the wage gap between them – the cause of her preference -- becomes wider. This compromises her bargaining situation with Larry, and makes her vulnerable to many bad outcomes in both home and future work opportunities. Her adaptive preference to be a stay at home mom is clearly not good for her in the long run, at least not materially. It does not come out of a theoretical commitment to an oppressive ideology, but

²³ In "Oppression by Choice," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 25(1994):22-44, I initially presented the Larry-Lisa example as an example in which the gendered wage gap is a manifestation and cause of the oppression of women.

she has arguably made the best of a bad situation, and she might, given the situation she faces, reflectively endorse it. So we might use her future loss of human capital as an argument to try to persuade her about what she ought, rationally, do with her life. But we probably don't want to prevent her from having these adaptive preferences or insist that she change them just because acting on them forecloses certain options that would have made her better off. After all, people form preferences for and engage in all kinds of activities that foreclose better options in their future, which a liberal society ought to allow and respect.

A third problem is that in some cases the PAOs may be immediately self-defeating. Examples of this type may seem hard to find, but I submit they are not. Take, for example, the abused wife who has the kinds of preferences that Lisa has, but also has an abusive spouse. By playing the role of the domestic wife, she makes it almost impossible to escape abuse, since she is economically dependent on her spouse and more attached to their children who she cares for. For agents who may end up in this situation, their adaptive preferences are not good for them, even on their own terms, since by satisfying them they end up immediately worse off. That is, by satisfying her preference to be a stay at home mom, Lisa becomes the victim of abuse. At the same time that they satisfy their preferences they wind up in what almost anyone would say is a dispreferred state. These preferences might be making the best of a bad situation, but the situation is so horrible that it cannot be endorsed. They might also come out of a commitment to some religious view about the nature of men and women, but even so, it would be implausible to assert that they should therefore be respected. Could such preferences be reflectively endorsed by Lisa? The difficulties that prosecutors and law enforcement officers have in getting abused women to prosecute their husbands suggests that they sometimes are; abused women often choose to return to their spouses for a variety of reasons even after they have had a chance to

consider other options. So we have a counterexample to the arguments for respecting adaptive preferences on the grounds that it raises welfare. However, this is a limited class of cases. I wish to make the stronger claim that no adaptive preferences caused by oppressive circumstances should carry normative presumption.

The fourth and most general reason to reject PAOs is that they almost inevitably reinforce the social structures that oppress the group as a whole, and hence they run a very high and unacceptable risk of harming others. Social norms work by motivating many individual actions that in turn create the motivations to follow them. Lisa's situation is replicated many times in society, since women are raised to be mothers, and they are likely to have lower expected wages, due to a variety of oppressive circumstances. But all the Lisas who prefer to be stay at home moms reinforce the norms of women as unpaid domestic workers, create the conditions for implicit bias and stereotype threat against women, and lower the expected wage for women with otherwise equal qualifications to men. They recreate for their children the stereotypes of women as mothers and men as breadwinners, and construct gender as a relevant vector of discrimination in the workplace, education, childrearing, etc. Thus, Lisa participates in a social norm that harms others. Not resisting these adaptive preferences harms others of her social group. Hence these adaptive preferences ought not be given positive normative weight.

An objection to my analysis of the harms of PAOs is that none of these problems result from the adaptiveness of the preferences, but rather from something else (imprudence, self-defeatingness, or immorality).²⁴ I have two responses to this. First, my aim is to show that there is some reason to oppose adaptive preferences that have adapted to oppressive circumstances, not necessarily to show that their adaptiveness is the problem in itself. But second, I believe that the

²⁴ Donald Bruckner raised this objection in his comments on this paper presented at the Central Division APA, Feb. 17, 2012.

fourth problem is a problem with the fact that PAOs are *adaptive-to-oppression*. While I grant that the first three of these kinds of problems can arise from preferences that are not adaptive or not adaptive to oppression, the fourth is a special kind of problem with PAO's that is important to consider for moral and political reasons. Although the first three problems for adaptive preferences do not apply in each case, I will argue in the next section that the last problem always applies, and then conclude that this gives us good reasons to oppose, resist, and change the adaptive preferences if we can do so without sacrificing something of even greater moral value.

IV. Adaptations to oppression reinforce oppression

In other work I have argued that oppression lasts for generations when and because it co-opts the oppressed to acting in ways that further their oppression.²⁵ This is not to say that the oppressed bring oppression on themselves, since they are not in the first instance responsible for the oppressive social structures. Oppression begins with forceful subjugation, and it is the dominator, not the subjugated, who bears full responsibility for this beginning. But once oppression has begun, norms arise and are reinforced that keep the oppressed and the privileged in their social roles. These roles create stereotypes that make people believe that the oppressed and the privileged are different. They enforce boundaries around social groups, and exaggerate differences between groups, which are then used as rationales for differential treatment. The differences divide the two groups into those who are to be denied or offered opportunities, status, and other social goods.

Once there are bounded social groups, the boundaries are policed by both in-group and out-group members. Norms motivate behavior by assigning social penalties for transgressing

²⁵ Cudd, 2006.

group boundaries, but also by rewarding those who are exemplary members of the group to which they are seen as belonging, even when it is the oppressed group. The stereotype of the dumb blonde may be bad for women generally, but it does not stop individual women from wanting to live up to the stereotype for the small rewards of male attention if one can be a really good example. Think of the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders, or the waitresses at Hooters. They may fully recognize that the stereotype is harmful to other women and to themselves sometimes, but by playing up their conformity to the stereotype in a given situation, they receive the locally greater rewards of more money and attention than other women receive. In this sense they are making the best of the oppressive social norms that they find.

Not all conformity to stereotypes is done with intent *to benefit at others' expense*. Members of oppressed groups often believe that the differences between social groups are natural and inevitable, and they may even come to see those differences as good and to be preserved. The right wing women who are sincerely committed to fundamentalist Christian ideology, which prescribes different lives for men and women and commands wifely obedience, exemplify this phenomenon. Acting from such commitments is of course intentional, although the intent is not to benefit at others' expense, but rather from the belief that the oppressive social norms are good ones to uphold. Thus, the oppressed can be co-opted either through their conscious bargaining or through being kept in thrall by ideology, in Narayan's words, either "bargaining with patriarchy" or being "dupes of patriarchy."

It will be objected that we should not hold individuals responsible for reinforcing social norms when their individual actions are not causally necessary for the maintenance of the norms. That is, many of us have to act in ways that reinforce the norms in order for those norms to continue; any one of us acting alone would not create or even maintain a social norm in the

absence of many others' actions. I agree that no individual's action is causally necessary; social norms are essentially products of collective actions. However, individuals still bear moral responsibility for collective actions that they participate in intending to conform to the norm. By acting according to oppressive social norms, with the intention to conform, we are complicit with oppression, and for this we are blameworthy. Christopher Kutz's work on complicity is helpful here. He defends what he calls the "Complicity Principle: I am accountable for what others do when I intentionally participate in the wrong they do or the harm they cause."²⁶ In the case of oppressive social norms, the harm or the wrong is oppression. Does it matter if someone does not understand the social norms as oppressive? I contend that the complicity principle still holds because they intend to participate in the social norm and thereby to uphold it. I suggest that we distinguish responsibility from blameworthiness in those cases where the misunderstanding is itself non-negligent, although I will not further investigate what that means here. Thus, although they are morally responsible even without knowledge of the oppression, they are not blameworthy if they are non-negligently unaware that the norm is oppressive. That they are mistaken about the whether the norm is harmful mitigates their blameworthiness, but not their responsibility.

PAOs inevitably reinforce oppression because they are seen as reasons to reinforce it. It is not only liberal or consequentialist philosophers who believe that people should get what they prefer, after all. Most members of oppressed groups come to identify with and proclaim their preferences to live according to the stereotypical preferences and prescribed social norms of their groups. That fact seems to give us reason to respect their preferences. One might even object that it is cruel and demanding to require that adaptive preferences be given up by the oppressed,

²⁶ Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age*, Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.122.

especially when they seem to be self-sacrificing preferences. But that is just what I think morality demands: that the oppressed resist social norms that are motivated by PAOs.

V. Resistance, Reproach, and Intervention

If I am right that acting on PAOs almost inevitably harms others and typically harms the one who has the preferences, then it ought to be resisted. To be clear, I am arguing that all of us, including the oppressed, have the obligation resist oppressive social norms in some way. This is because we have only two options: either we reinforce the oppressive norm by not resisting it, or we resist it. Since PAOs uphold oppressive social norms, acting in accord with them is wrongdoing. Hence they have to be resisted. Resistance can take the form of protesting a norm, acting counter-normatively, supporting someone who is flouting a norm, quietly refusing to go along with a norm, or avoiding situations where the norm applies, among others. Both the positive effects on changing the norm, and the dangers and penalties for resisting have to be taken into account, of course, in deciding what one should do in any particular circumstance.

One problem with oppression and the adaptive preferences that they cause is that they are often not easily noticed. This may seem to mitigate the obligation we have to resist PAOs. As I have said, oppressive norms last for generations because they become part of the fabric of social norms. The norms define persons in their discriminatory and excluded roles so that life within these norms appears normal and inevitable. It is difficult to see how life might be otherwise, and almost no one is eager to live an abnormal life flouting oppressive social norms, since such behavior makes them outcasts. For example, gay people until very recently had every reason to prefer to remain in the closet, but the existence of the closet made gayness unusual, fearful, even disgusting. These emotions of fear and disgust reinforced the oppression of gay people, made it

likely that they would be treated violently, and made the closet that much more preferable to coming out. But the paucity of out gay people in society reinforced the attitude towards homosexuality that it was something strange or queer. That created a difficult epistemic situation for people to see gayness as a normal way of being. In such a situation it may seem that people should not be held responsible for changing their attitudes and accepting gayness. But I want to resist this conclusion and hold us responsible to resist. As Cheshire Calhoun has argued, holding people responsible for resisting oppressive norms is justified even in situations where the oppressive social norm appears to be reasonable and, well, normative.²⁷ For in these situations not resisting is acting in a way that harms others, which is wrongdoing.

To say that PAOs ought to be resisted is one thing; it is quite another to say how society should intervene to change adaptive preferences. I agree with Calhoun's view that in interpersonal situations, reproach is the best approach. But different methods of delivering a reproach are possible, and some are more likely to achieve a good result. What is a good result? It is twofold: first, that the person with adaptive preferences is brought to reconsider them and attempt to change them or at least not to act on them, and second, that this is done with the least harm possible to the oppressed person who is now being asked to change her preferences. For it must be remembered that she is a victim of oppression and has a difficult duty to bear.²⁸

The onus is not only on the oppressed to change their preferences; society more generally must create the conditions in which preference change can readily occur. It will be objected that responding to PAOs may create unfreedom that is unacceptable. If a society removes the

²⁷ Cheshire Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach." *Ethics*, 99(1989): 389-406.

²⁸ In the domestic violence shelter movement (among others) it has long been the practice to refer to women who seek shelter from their abuser as survivors rather than victims. By seeking shelter they are protesting their treatment by their abuser, and resisting the oppressive social norms that create and enforce their victimhood. It is their embrace, even if temporary, of this difficult duty to resist that warrants the term survivor to those victims who seek shelter.

unearned privileges from a currently privileged social group in order to benefit an oppressed group, then that restricts the freedom of the former group. For example, regulations of employment or lending practices that open employers or lenders to liability for racially disparate outcomes restrict freedom. Such measures may require that those employers and lenders make significant efforts to educate and advertise to oppressed groups in order to change their preferences for types of employment or housing opportunities. But by definition the employers' and lenders' freedoms from scrutiny are unearned privileges. So removing them does not violate justice if it is in the service of remedying oppression.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has explored one aspect of the claim that it is better for people to get what they prefer, focusing on the specific cases of adaptive preferences that are formed under and are preferences for behaving in accord with oppressive social norms. I examined several arguments that defend such preferences as autonomous, authentic, or as otherwise giving us reasons to give them positive normative weight personally and socially. I argued that such preferences are often harmful to the one who has them, but more importantly, that they are always harmful to others, namely to the members of social groups oppressed by those norms. Acting in accordance with preferences that are adaptive to oppression thus makes one complicit with the immorality of oppression. Finally, I argued that this fact generates an obligation to resist one's own such preferences, and to design social institutions that will help one to change those preferences.