Adaptive Preferences and the Hellenistic Insight

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1. Introduction

Adaptive preferences are preferences formed in response to circumstances and opportunities – paradigmatically, they occur when we scale back our desires so they accord with what is probable or at least possible. While few commentators are willing to wholly reject the normative significance of such preferences, adaptive preferences have nevertheless attracted substantial criticism in recent political theory. The groundbreaking analysis of Jon Elster charged that such preferences are not autonomous, and several other commentators have since followed Elster's lead. On a second front, capability theorists Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen have objected that adaptive preferences lead people away from objective goods and constitute an impediment to progressive change in developing countries. In this paper I argue that the criticisms of Elster, Sen and Nussbaum fail on the one hand to take into account what may be positively said in favour of this type of preference formation, and fail on the other hand to distinguish between different types of psychological changes – with the result that many of the critiques offered have a narrower purview than is currently allowed. My analysis of adaptive preferences, even in their most ideal form, is however not entirely positive; I adduce reasons why we can be cautious about allowing adaptive preferences to play certain types of roles in political processes, even as we accept those very preferences as normative and autonomous for the agent holding them.

The argument begins in Section Two by distinguishing five separate mechanisms by which a person may come to change the content or nature of their preferences. In Section Three I argue that one of these – 'Hellenistic Adaptation' – is uniquely justified. This argument is founded on the three bases of happiness, objective value and autonomy. In Section Four I consider some of the objections to adaptive preferences in the literature, and before in Section Five sketching some consequences of this argument for contemporary political theory.

2. Mechanisms of change to the content or nature of preferences

There are many ways a person's preferences and motivations for action can alter according to their circumstances. In this section I distinguish five key mechanisms of such psychological change. This list is not exhaustive. For instance, I pass over, (i) adaptations to situations that change the amount of felt-satisfaction without altering preferences as such, (ii) the oft-noted continual expansion of aspirations where we strive for ever-greater achievements (Teschl and Comim, 2005, pp. 237-40), and, (iii) the way we learn about the joys and satisfactions internal to certain practices and activities by experiencing them (Brucker, 2009, p. 312; Elster, 1983, pp. 112-13).

1. *Preference- or Action-Targeting Moral Obloquy*: *'I desire δ, but I recognize that such a desire, or the action precipitated by it, is morally wrong.'* If we become convinced, by argument, indoctrination, religious decree, socialization or some other process that a particular action (or the desire to perform that action) is morally wrong, then that alters the way that preference works in our decision-making (Walker, 1995, p. 459). We still hold the preference – but we resist on moral grounds it giving us reasons for action.[1]

2. *Resignation: Learned Helplessness and Learned Worthlessness*: *'I desire δ, but my happiness, and my preferences, for δ or anything else, are insignificant. They constitute no reason for anyone to act.'* There are two ways a person can come to detach their preferences from having any role in action-formation, either theirs or others. The first is 'learned helplessness'. From experience we learn that nothing we do alters our situation for the better and so we come to detach our preferences from their normal role of motivating actions (Teschl and Comim, 2005, p. 238). Our response to this conditioning process is one of learned passivity – we are not happy, but we have come to fatalistically resign ourselves to the grim fact that our happiness is impossible and inconsequential. This resignation may also arise from learned worthlessness. Learned worthlessness can occur through relentless assaults on our self-esteem or through direct moral indoctrination. In the latter case, we are taught or socialised into an ethical system where our desires and happiness do not morally count; they constitute no reasons for anyone to act. While I follow the psychological literature in terming these responses 'learned', connotations of heuristic activity, pro-activeness and deliberateness are not apposite. 'Learned' here is used in the narrow sense of *conditioned*.

3. *Hellenistic Adaptation*: *'Holding a desire for δ was not, given my situation and capabilities, conducive to my happiness, so I have changed my preferences to no longer desire δ.'* In this case, a particular preference is found to be unlikely to lead to personal happiness. This is because its chance of successful fulfilment is too low – to retain the preference is to want what we cannot get. This low chance of fulfilment may be combined with high costs of pursuit; the time, resources and effort invested are judged not to be worth it. The name I use derives from the foundational insight shared by the two main ethical theories developed in the Hellenistic period, Stoicism and Epicureanism. Though they each took the insight to different conclusions, both these ethical traditions began with the realization that happiness is closely related to having fulfilled preferences. For this reason, having preferences that are not likely to be fulfilled, or that can be fulfilled only at substantial cost to other important preferences, is unwise (Cicero, 1883, 1:19; Mitsis, 1988, p. 1). Such desires are an impediment to what the Hellenistic philosophers held to be the most important thing for any person, their own happiness.

While I will flesh out this process of Hellenistic Adaptation in the following section, two points deserve note here. First, the agent's preferences must change. The agent is not merely choosing to act for ε rather than for δ on the basis of the high costs and low likelihood of achieving δ – they are coming to *no longer prefer δ at all*. Second, as I will understand it, the process can be anything from meticulously deliberate to largely unconscious. At minimum, the agent needs to be aware on some level that their pursuit of the desired object δ is not meeting with success. Moreover, they are dissatisfied with this situation and they have no reason to expect improvement in the future. But I will count it as Hellenistic Adaptation even if their preference for δ comes to be diminished without their consciously reflecting that their desire for δ is making them frustrated and that they would be happier without it, and *a fortiori* without their engaging on a deliberate regimen (as the Stoics envisaged) for ridding

themselves of the preference. Of course, most instances of Hellenistic Adaptation fall between these extremes – we might do no more than tell ourselves to 'get over' our pointless infatuation with a previous lover, or we recognize the wisdom when we are told to 'love the one you're with'.

4. *Sour Grapes: 'I could not have δ, and so I have come to hold that δ is not desirable.'* In the fable of the fox and the grapes it is insufficiently noted that the fox goes beyond mere Hellenistic Adaptation (e.g. Elster, pp. 219-220). As Brucker (2007, p. 320) observes, the source of the fox's obvious irrationality is that he comes to a belief that is presumably false and is plainly not substantiated by any evidence he has: *those grapes are sour*. The fox moves from his incapacity to possess δ not merely to the view that he would do well not to desire those grapes, but to the view that those grapes are such as would not be desirable to anyone. This is a form of irrationality of belief formation; if it is an indispensable property of beliefs that they aim at truth, then the fox is being irrational and self-deceiving by coming to form a belief on the basis of reasons that have nothing to do with the truth or falsity of that belief. (It is possible that even *non*-evaluative descriptive beliefs may change on some such basis: see Sunstein, 1991, p. 21.) If Hellenistic Adaptation is the changing of our preferences to cohere with the demands of reality as we understand it, then Sour Grapes irrationality is the changing of our understanding of reality in order to cohere with our preferences.

5. *Negative cognitive habituation and emotional besmirching: 'Every time I consider unattainable object δ I feel distaste and think about nothing but its defects'*. It has proven a challenge for commentators to pin down exactly what Elster has in mind as his target in his influential work on sour grapes (e.g. Baber, 2007, p. 112). But I think we can give an account of the type of psychological change at work in Elster's examples that explains, a) why the acquired affective state is swiftly reversible, b) why Elster speaks of the change as 'habituation', c) why it tends to be negative – rejecting what we couldn't have, rather than loving what we can, and, d) why it tends to 'overshoot', giving us a stronger response than seems rationally called for (Elster, 1983, pp. 110-124). What is at work here, I think, is a colouring of mood and habituation of thought. Emotionally, we work up a state of dislike, hatred, disgust, resentment or scorn (perhaps fueled by our incapacity to attain the object) and we direct it at the unattainable object itself. We smear it internally with ugly emotive connotations. Cognitively, we develop a habit of stressing its defects to ourselves whenever we consider it (Elster, 1983, p. 119). In this way, we mentally paper over the *genuine desire that remains for the object* – we unconsciously manufacture a single-minded antipathy, perhaps going far beyond what is sensible for our own happiness and tranquility. We don't stop loving it, we just respond psychologically as if we hated it. However, if the object – a lover, a promotion, the grapes – suddenly becomes available, it is easy enough to cast off the emotional patina and confess to ourselves that we always *really* desired it.

In the following section I will marshal arguments for the reasonableness of Hellenistic Adaptation, and so of the normative significance of preferences formed on its basis. In Section Three I will argue that most of the key concerns raised against adaptive preferences are, upon examination, worries about one or other of the remaining psychological mechanisms described above.

3. Reasons in favor of Hellenistic Adaptation

Though in the literature on adaptive preferences Hellenistic Adaptation is not specifically distinguished, there is nevertheless a general awareness that some such process can be good

for the agent.[2] Here I offer three types of reasons why Hellenistic Adaptation is significant – on the basis of happiness, objective value and autonomy.

3.1 Hellenistic Adaptation and Felt-Happiness

The most fundamental reason for changing our unlikely-to-ever-be-fulfilled-preference is simply that we will be happier when we have done so. The very foundation of a life of happiness, as John Stuart Mill drew it out of antiquity, was 'not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing' (2001, p. 13). There are four ways happiness might be sundered by unrealistic preferences.

First, and most obvious, there is the pain of disappointment. When we desire some object, and act to gain it, we are inevitably disappointed and frustrated if we fail to obtain it. As the Stoic Epictetus put it:

> following desire promises the attainment of that of which you are desirous; and aversion promises the avoiding [of] that to which you are averse. However, he who fails to obtain the object of his desire is disappointed, and he who incurs the object of his aversion wretched… if you desire any of the things which are not in your own control, you must necessarily be disappointed.[3]

The conclusion is evident. Desiring what we cannot have sets us up for disappointment and frustration. An agent wisely pursuing her own happiness will therefore seek to diminish or dissolve such desires and so to have – as Phillip Mitsis describes Epicurus' prescription – her 'scope of satisfactions expand and contract to adjust to individual circumstances' (1988, p. 51, pp. 118-27).

Second, there is the unpleasing array of emotions a person feels when they desire something they know is not within their power to achieve. When we are aware that what we desire is a hostage to fortune we experience negative emotions like fear, stress and perturbation.[4] Contrariwise, someone who has no desires for things she cannot obtain experiences other goods – she sees herself as in control, strong and unconquerable (Epictetus, 1758, [2]; Cicero, 1883, 1:12; Smith, 2006, pp. 48-55). Epicurus famously added to our happiness-based worries about fear and distress by arguing there is a distinct form of pleasure achieved by the person who is not disturbed by stresses or fears for the future: *tranquility*. Tranquility arises not from actively fulfilling preferences, but from the pleasant state of having no outstanding preferences of the sort that give rise to the uncomfortable 'tempest of the soul'.[5]

Third, as Epicurus further argued, at least some wants are undesirable simply in terms of the experience of having them (1957a, pp. 31-2). The experience of want can be itself a type of pain; it is an itch that, until scratched, is a discomfort. As Epicurus saw it – and surely this holds for at least some preferences – we must fulfil the want just to ease its unpleasant demand and so to return to our prior emotional state. For wants that have little chance of fulfilment, we experience the dissatisfaction of felt desire without even the prospect of swift fulfilment.

Fourth, there is disharmony caused by desiring things that we consistently fail to obtain. Pursuing the impossible has material, emotional and life costs, and awareness of these costs creates conflicts and temptations in our decision-making. Desires incapable of satisfaction 'quarrel and fall out among themselves; and this cannot but render the whole of life embittered' (Cicero, 1883, 1:13).

For all these reasons, *ceteris paribus*, a person acts wisely – rationally pursues their happiness – when they rid themselves of preferences that they are unable to achieve.

3.2 Hellenistic Adaptation and the Good Life

It is often supposed that Hellenistic Adaptation loses some of its luster if we suppose that there exists an objectively good life for humans (e.g. Brucker, 2009, p. 321). After all, Hellenistic Adaptation is performed in the face of external circumstances, and the fact that we cannot achieve something seems poor evidence for its not, in fact, being a worthwhile pursuit. As we will see later (§4, §5.2), there is something to be said for this concern. But here I want to illustrate three links between Hellenistic Adaptation and objective goods, and to deflect one major worry.

First, objective human goods are goods that will be in some deep sense linked with human capacities. As Nussbaum herself notes, our acceptance that we cannot fly as we might have wished when we were children is doubtless an adaptive preference, and we are better for the having of it (2001, p. 78). Flying is, reasonably, not a basic human good, and when we respond to limitations we share with the rest of our species, we are not moving away from plausible lists of objective human goods, but *towards* them. Another way of putting this point is that values – even objective values – might best be understood as meeting places between a person's will and the world around them. True human goods are not out of touch with reality and human capacities – and Hellenistic Adaptation is the process that brings ideals into alignment with reality.

Second, as I noted in §2, there are some types of situations to which the human response is not Hellenistic Adaptation but rather learned helplessness: a fatalistic resignation that our preferences are not, in fact, important. If so, then the fact that people *cannot* adapt their preferences in the face of widespread powerlessness, as they can adapt to other grim circumstances, seems to hint at the possibility that the need for control over some facets of our life is an imprescriptible interest of every person. As Veenhoven puts it: 'in contrast to "wants", "needs" are not relative. Needs are absolute demands for human functioning, which do not adjust to any and all conditions; in fact, they mark the limits of human adaptability' (2007, p. 258). This outcome might well be welcomed by Capability Theorists like Nussbaum. Charting the limits of preference adaptation might help us draw a line between capability-based needs and other less fundamental wants. At minimum, we might think, objective human goods must include those interests and capacities where attempts at preference-adaptation fail, and other psychological defense-mechanisms step in.

Third, Hellenistic Adaptation will often occasion *reflection*. By feeling the high costs and low successes accompanying some desire, we are prompted to consider whether holding that desire is *worth it*. At least in some cases, this consideration will involve trying to gauge what really is worthwhile in human life – that is, into what ends are valuable. In this way the Hellenistic Insight can prompt us to reflect upon what is objectively good for human beings.

Now for the worry I wish to deflect. It might be thought that Hellenistic Adaptation will make life small and mediocre – that it will strip human existence of its richness and fullness. It is true enough that there will be times Hellenistic Adaptation will prompt ask us to reflect on precisely how rich and full – how complicated and busy – we want our lives to be. But two Stoic points bear notice here. First, Hellenistic Adaptation does not require we give up those dreams that require great labor and fortitude. We can still wish to be everything that we can be – we just should avoid trying to be *more* than that. But more importantly second,

Hellenistic Adaptation directs us to focus on the joys inherent in our journey – in the life that is lived in pursuit of some goal, rather than attaining the goal itself. The Stoics acted and strived in the world – but they located their excellences and joys *in* that action and striving (Epictetus, 1758, [1], [10], [17]; Aurelius, 2006, pp. 19, 28; Long, 2006, p. 388). They did not let the entirety of their happiness rest upon the question of whether they succeeded in this or that endeavor. The success was in undertaking and acting well in the endeavor itself – and *that* success fate could not steal from them.

If these points are well-founded, then Hellenistic Adaptation need not occasion either a distortion or an abandoning of the true human good life, but rather a route to understanding and embracing it.

3.3 Hellenistic Adaptation and Autonomy

The central objection to adaptive preferences introduced by Jon Elster in his influential work on sour grapes was that such preferences are not autonomous. That is, adaptive preferences are formed as a result of factors external to the agent, and are thus not ends that the agent has set themselves (Elster, 1982; Sunstein, 1991, p. 11). Now it bears immediate notice that merely because a preference is not autonomous does not *ipso facto* mean it is insignificant. Suppose, for example, that an adult, Amy, has a preference for playing tennis. This preference, however, was formed through the exploitative actions of her parents. Her parents envisioned making a fortune through Amy's athletic talents, and coerced the child Amy into relentless practice. Now grown up and freed from their yoke, Amy still loves to play tennis. She enjoys the exercise, the competitiveness, and her excellence at and knowledge of the game. And she would count it as a real and deep loss to her life if this pursuit was forbidden to her. In such a case, it would be a genuine harm to Amy to prevent her from engaging in this preferred activity. As such, respecting Amy might require we respect her current preference irrespective of its exploitative provenance (Brucker, 2009, p. 316; Walker, 1995, p. 464). So much is only to point out that attributions of autonomy are not decisive in settling whether we should respect a person's preferences. But it is consistent with this point to think that autonomy is of profound normative importance, and in the remains of this section I marshal three reasons why Hellenistic Adaptation can be a move towards, or at least in line with, one's autonomy.

First, Elster acknowledged one exception to his judgment about autonomy and adaptive preferences. When the mechanism creating the change in preferences was an intentional process of shaping – the Stoic regimen being the prime example – then autonomy was possible (Elster, 1983, pp. 224, 227). The reasoning here is straightforward enough. If autonomy is the setting of one's own ends, then any process – like Hellenistic Adaptation – that has a person reflecting upon their ends, choosing new ones, and working to acquire those ends as new preferences is to that extent a process conducive to autonomy. As Elster says, 'there is a respectable and I believe valid doctrine that explains freedom in terms of the ability to accept and embrace the inevitable' (1983, p.119). Elster's view, however, is that the overwhelming majority of adaptive preferences are not formed in this explicit, deliberate and effortful manner. But the matter is not as black and white as he envisages. The person telling themselves to 'grow up' or 'make the best of it', burning their old photographs, or just marshalling the will to get out of the house is consciously shaping their ends, though this is a vast distance from the Stoic's assiduous character-shaping. It is unclear why this level of awareness and determination is insufficient to begin attributions of autonomy in Elster's sense and hence allow most instances of Hellenistic Adaptation to count *pro tanto* as autonomous.

In order to assess the second reason, we need to turn to one of the few major defenses of adaptive preferences in recent years, that of Donald Brucker. Brucker puts forward a test of subjunctive reflective endorsement: 'an agent's adaptive preference is rational provided that *if* she *were* to examine the preference, *then* she *would* endorse it upon reflection' (2009, p. 322). Brucker argues that, contrary to Elster, we should acknowledge a preference as rational, not if it was autonomously acquired, but if it could be 'autonomously retained' (2009, p. 319). If an agent was to reflect on the preference in question, if he *identified* with that preference and his reasons for holding it, then he endorses it. In such a case, Brucker argues, it is a preference that is rightly ascribed to him and should carry normative weight; it is a genuine reason for action. Combined with the analysis of §3.1 above this means, provided that the preference-holder identifies with the pursuit of happiness as one of their worthwhile ongoing goals, that preferences forged on the basis of Hellenistic Adaptation will be reflectively endorsed. Since the overwhelming majority of people do in fact take their own happiness to be a genuine personal goal, then absent specific countervailing commitments (Brucker considers ambitions: 2009, p. 320), there should be a presumption that Hellenistic Adaptation is autonomous in this sense.

The main instance where this will not hold true is when the Hellenistic Adaptation was in fact erroneous – when the pursuit of happiness that forged the new preference was itself wrong-headed. Epictetus provides a possible example:

> Women from fourteen years old are flattered with the title of 'mistresses' by the men. Therefore, perceiving that they are regarded only as qualified to give the men pleasure, they begin to adorn themselves, and in that to place ill their hopes. (1758, [40])

We may read this as young women allowing their preferences to adapt to what they perceive as a way that they can expect to be happy, but without being aware of their opportunities for happiness outside being objects of pleasure for men, or aware of the risks, limitations and transience of the happiness that being such an object in fact carries. The net result is that we can expect accurate and informed Hellenistic Adaptation, but not erroneous or misguided adaptation, to be reflectively endorsed and so autonomous in Brucker's sense.

Third, sometimes when we speak of autonomy we refer to the control a person has over their life – we are enquiring as to whether their life was one that they authored, or one authored by others. So it is worth on this footing noting that the Stoic (and to an extent the Epicurean: Mitsis, 1988, p. 88) reasons for Hellenistic Adaptation were not narrowly concerned with happiness, but also for control of one's life. To desire something that is up to the whim of another is to make your happiness hostage to their favor. As Epictetus describes:

> He is the master of every other person who is able to confer or remove whatever that person wishes either to have or to avoid. Whoever, then, would be free, let him wish nothing, let him decline nothing, which depends on others, else he must necessarily be a slave.[6]

By having us take responsibility for our own happiness, Hellenistic Adaptation thus prevents others holding power over us.

For these three reasons, Hellenistic Adaptation can be a key strategy in authoring our own lives and achieving autonomy.

4. The Capability Theorist's objections

Capability theorists like Nussbaum and Sen argue that adaptive preferences are a serious concern normatively and practically. On a normative level, adaptive preferences are an issue because, capability theorists contend, people – especially women – can be adapted to situations that are objectionable. Some political theories, including many forms of utilitarianism, will then take those adapted preferences as reasons not to change the objectionable state of affairs. This result, the capability theorists' submit, is unacceptable, and it suggests that we should instead adopt an objective list of human goods or 'capabilities' (Sen, 1995, pp. 261-63). On a practical level, adaptive preferences are an issue because, says Nussbaum, in putting the objective list of goods…

> at the center of a normative political project aimed at providing the philosophical underpinning for basic political principles, we are going against not just other people's preferences about women, but, more controversially, against many preferences (or so it seems) of women about themselves and their lives. (2001, pp. 67-68)

When we turn to the type of examples presented by these theorists however, what we find is that the problems are often not ones of changed preferences at all. The central culprits appear to be changed *beliefs* that, a) some particular preferences they hold are morally wrong, or, b) whatever preferences they do or might hold are normatively irrelevant, where this last has been created by either learned helplessness or moral indoctrination, or, more likely, a corrosive combination of the two. Nussbaum's discussion of Vasanti, a woman in an abusive marriage, is representative: 'Like many women, she seems to have thought that abuse was painful and bad, but, still, a part of women's lot in life, just something women have to put up with as part of being a woman…' (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 68). But contrary to Nussbaum's position, Vasanti has *not* come to prefer the abuse; the state being reported is one where she hates it but accepts it as a moral and descriptive reality. The change reported is thus one of learned helplessness and learned worthlessness, not Hellenistic Adaptation. The two cases are sharply distinguished by the Epicurean, who contrasts the genuine acquisition of new preferences with resignation: 'to bow the head to pain and bear it abjectly and feebly is a pitiable thing' (Cicero, 1883, 1:15). Sen's examples similarly surround cases of real conflict of interests between women and men that are culturally effaced through various forms of social conditioning, especially the inculcation of moral belief (Sen, 1993, p. 261). Again, the culprits here are learned moral worthlessness and preference-targeting moral obloquy. Even without considering the issue of moral indoctrination, Teschl and Comim earlier came to a similar conclusion: the capability theorists' analysis was not of adaptive preferences at all, but 'should be more appropriately called analysis of resignation' (2005, p. 242).

Sometimes, to be sure, we find cases where changed preferences cause real political concerns – but when this occurs the font of the problem often lies in an accompanying changed belief, namely, that the newly formed preferences are objectively right. A woman can, I have argued, rationally and autonomously (in some important senses at least) have decided in the face of illiberal conditions that a working life is not what she prefers. But if she goes further and holds that, irrespective of changed political circumstances, a working life is objectively wrong for all women (including, say, her daughters) then she falls into Sour Grapes irrationality. The irrationality may be understandable, but it remains irrational.

If this is right, then worries about adaptive preferences are substantially diminished. On a normative level, the utilitarian can accept a person's preferences while rejecting their

concurrent beliefs that the preference is morally wrong or irrelevant (Baber, 2007, p. 124). Both those beliefs are, after all, contrary to what the utilitarian understands to be basic moral facts: that particular preferences are not of themselves wrong and that each person's preferences must enter the moral calculus. On a practical level, certain problems are also mitigated. What the reformer needs to do is to use argument, evidence and illustration to show that the moral beliefs into which the person was indoctrinated were misplaced (indeed, in all likelihood, were manipulative and exploitative) or that the factual claims on which those beliefs were based were untrue. It is not, for instance, in the nature of things that women must remain uneducated and neglected, and moral conclusions based upon this flawed vision of the world should therefore be changed. But this task of consciousness-raising can be done at the same time as accepting that the preferences the women currently hold might be genuine and autonomous reflections of who they are, and of their admirably taking charge of their own lives and happiness within the action-space open to them.

5. Further Political Applications

The broad conclusion arising from the foregoing arguments is that preferences formed on the basis of Hellenistic Adaptation warrant respect. They are normative for the person who holds them, in the sense that they provide him or her with genuine, rational and autonomous reasons for action. And they are for these reasons normatively relevant in guiding others' moral actions, whether this means being included in utilitarian calculations or allowing space for their operation in the shaping of rights and consent.

In what follows I want to draw two further, more specific, conclusions.

5.1 Respect for the formation of expectations

If the capacity to perform Hellenistic Adaptation is indeed a key tool used by each person in the pursuit of their happiness, autonomy and objective human goods, then political institutions have strong reasons to make Hellenistic Adaptation a genuine possibility. At a minimum, this requires that citizens can form accurate, stable expectations about their entitlements and the results of their activities. When we form favorable expectations for the future, Hellenistic Adaptation has our desires for those results strengthen (Bentham, 1781, pp. 48-49). We deem ourselves rationally justified in allowing our desires to extend to these results, because we expect them to obtain. In desiring these results we do not, we think, threaten our happiness or future freedom. When our expectations are based not only on evidence but on social mores and laws about the consequences of actions, then they attain additional force again – we feel *socially legitimated* in extending our desires into those expectations. At minimum then, we have a further reason, beyond well-known concerns regarding procedural fairness and coordination, that political regimes should obey the rule of law.

The philosopher who placed expectations at the heart of the political project was Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism, and his reasons for doing so were very much centered on the significance of expectations for happiness. We must consider that man is, he tells us, 'susceptible of pains and pleasures by anticipation; and that it is not enough to secure him from actual loss, but it is necessary also to guarantee him, as far as possible, against future loss' (1978, p. 50). For this reason – to diminish the pains of present fear and future disappointment – the law must be structured around the establishing and protecting of expectations (1978, p. 51). In my terms, the law must recognize the significance of Hellenistic Adaptation to personal happiness, and be crafted with this in mind. It is this that

explains, I think, what Jeremy Waldron (1999) calls the 'normative resilience of property' – the nervousness that is felt when property is suddenly redistributed even when we are confident about the abstract justice of doing so. The person losing the property is not only suffering disappointment, but disappointment of those preferences that it was in a deep sense appropriate – rationally and socially – for the person to come to hold.

5.2 Respect for consent, but not for distribution of political resources and opportunities
In §3.3 I argued that a person may endorse their adaptive preferences because they were formed as part of a rational pursuit of happiness. However, the same reasoning process does not justify that preference being used in a social decision-making process governing, for instance, the distribution of future opportunities. What made the preference rational and so autonomous for the person was that, given the surrounding circumstances and her beliefs about them, it would further her happiness to have it. This provides little reason to believe that *another* person, who is not or may not be similarly placed, should rationally or autonomously choose to cultivate that preference. To presume that it would falls afoul of Sour Grapes irrationality – we move fallaciously from the true claim that it was not wise for me to desire δ to the false (or at least unsupported) claim that δ is in fact not desirable. This result dovetails with and further supports a common position taken with regard to adaptive preferences – that they supply genuine reasons for a person to give or withhold consent about what happens to her, but fail to supply good reasons for a person to justifiably allocate resources or opportunities to others (Walker, 1995, 463-69; Nussbaum, 2001, p. 86). The 'rightness' of any individual holding particular adaptive preferences should not make us think it is 'right' *simpliciter* that all individuals hold those preferences.

6. Conclusion

In the literature on adaptive preferences, it is sometimes noted that citizens of poorer countries have a 'rugged cheerfulness' about them. Far from bemoaning this trait and seeking to extirpate it, I submit that citizens of the developed world should consider *learning from it*. The developed world offers many of us vastly greater opportunities, choices, experiences, living-standards, longevity and real wealth than previous generations could have imagined. When the virtue that is Hellenistic Adaptation is not merely forgotten or suppressed, but is actively disparaged by our political thinking, then we as a culture lose hold of the very insight that allows freedom and welfare to translate into lived happiness.[7]

Notes

[1] On the reasons for this characterisation of the psychological state, see Baber, 2007, pp. 107, 124-25.

[2] E.g. Walker, 1995, pp. 464-65; Brucker, 2009, p. 313; Nussbaum, 2001 p. 78; Sunstein, 1991, p. 21.

[3] Epictetus, 1758, [2]. See similarly: Bentham, 1978, p. 50; Brennan, 2003, pp. 272-73; Long, 2006, p. 387.

[4] Epictetus, 1758, [12]; Epicurus, 1957a, p. 30, Bentham, 1978, p. 51, Cicero, 1883, 1:18.

[5] Epicurus, 1957a, p. 31; See similarly Epicurus, 1957b, p. 35; Cicero 1883, 1:11; Mitsis, 1988, p. 35; Smith 2006, p. 143

[6] Epictetus, 1758, [14]; See similarly Aurelius, 2006, pp. 29, 49; Smith, 2006, pp. 48-55; Long, 2006, p. 380.

[7] I am indebted to helpful comments and suggestions from an anonymous referee for the AJPAE, and to discussants at the AAPAE 2010 Conference, where an earlier version of this paper was presented.

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