

When are choices, actions, and consent based on adaptive preferences nonautonomous?

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Adaptive preferences give rise to puzzles in ethics, political philosophy, decision theory, and the theory of action. Like our other preferences, adaptive preferences lead us to make choices, take action, and give consent. In ‘False Consciousness for Liberals’, recently published in *The Philosophical Review*, David Enoch (2020) proposes a criterion by which to identify when these choices, actions, and acts of consent are less than fully autonomous; that is, when they suffer from what Natalie Stoljar (2014) calls an ‘autonomy deficit’. According to Enoch, such actions are not protected in the usual way against interference by others; there is not the same prohibition against trying to prevent someone from acting in a particular way when that action is motivated by such adaptive preferences and is an attempt to satisfy them. In this note, I raise two concerns about Enoch’s criterion.

1 What are adaptive preferences?

Let me begin by clarifying what adaptive preferences are. Many of our preferences, wants, desires, and values are shaped by the circumstances in which we live. Our adaptive preferences are among these. They are the ones that result from circumstances in which the options available to us are limited, perhaps because of norms in our society or our own natural limitations. An adaptive preference is a preference in favour of one of the options that is available, and perhaps against the unavailable options, and it is adaptive if we came to have that preference precisely because the favoured option is available and the unfavoured one unavailable.

So, for instance, consider a lesbian woman living in the UK in 2012. She forms the absolute preference to stay unmarried, and the comparative preference to stay unmarried over getting married. And she does this because marriage to the person she loves isn’t available to her at that time—marriage equality was achieved in the UK in 2014. This is an adaptive preference. Or, consider a gay man brought up in a deeply religious community

that abhors his sexuality. He comes to prefer romantic relationships with women over such relationships with men, and does so because the latter is unavailable to him. Again, an adaptive preference. Or consider a woman living in a very patriarchal society who eats less than she would like to eat at meal times, and indeed less than she must eat to remain healthy, so that there will be more food for her husband and children, even though there is more than enough food to go around and the result is that her husband and children eat more than they need and she ends up malnourished. She values this sacrifice, prefers it, and will defend it. And she does all this because her society imposes great costs on women who do not, and she has developed her preference for doing it because of this pressure (Khader, 2011). She has an adaptive preference. Finally, consider a teenager who previously liked both music and philosophy, but music more. She would like to be a great composer more than anything else in the world. But she learns that she lacks the musical talent for that at the same time she learns she does have the talent to be a very good philosopher. And because of this, she reverses her preferences so that she now prefers philosophy to music. Then she has an adaptive preference (Enoch, 2020, 167-8).

Note that the gay man's preference would not count as adaptive if he were simply to prefer the combination of a romantic relationship with a woman and remaining in his religious community to the combination of a romantic relationship with a man and being ejected from that community. If this were the case, he would simply have weighted the values of two components of his possible situations and come to prefer one bundle (relationship with woman + membership of community) over the other (relationship with man + lack of community). To be adaptive, he genuinely has to come to prefer the relationship with a woman over the relationship with a man regardless of what access to the religious community it gives.

2 Why are adaptive preferences puzzling?

Hopefully that gives a sense of what adaptive preferences are. Now let me say why they're puzzling. Preferences play many roles in our ethical and political thinking. Of course, they also play a role in the theory of action, decision theory, and so on, but I think the biggest puzzles arise from their role in ethics and political philosophy.

First: for many approaches in ethics, we need to be able to determine the well-being of an individual in different situations, and on some views that is determined by the extent to which their preferences are satisfied in that situation; but if some of their preferences are adaptive, should their satisfaction contribute to their well-being?

Second: the central question of social choice theory is how to combine the preferences of the members of a group to give the preferences of the

group itself, and then to use those preferences to make decisions on behalf of the group; but if some of those preferences are adaptive, should they be added to the mix in the first place or should they be left out?

Third: we typically think that we shouldn't interfere with someone who has chosen an action of their own volition that is in line with their preferences, providing the action isn't immoral; but if those preferences are adaptive, perhaps this presumption against interference fails?

It is the third question that occupies Enoch in his paper, and that's what will concern me here. But it's quite possible that his answer there will help with the other two questions, if it works. Perhaps the nonautonomous adaptive preferences that Enoch identifies—that is, the ones that issue in nonautonomous choices, actions, and consent—are also those whose satisfaction doesn't contribute to well-being and those that can or should be ignored when determining the preferences of the group. But I won't take a stand on that question here.

3 When do adaptive preferences give rise to an autonomy deficit?

It is often pointed out that, for almost everyone, nearly all of their preferences are formed in response to their situation, and many will be adaptive in the sense described above. Everyone faces restricted sets of options, even the most privileged among us; and, often, people will respond by adapting their preferences so that they value some of the options that are available to them more than they otherwise would. So if all adaptive preferences are such that choices, actions, and consent based on them are less than fully autonomous, and that means there is no presumption against interference with those actions by others, there will be very little presumption against interference in any of our actions, and that sounds awful.

But Enoch doesn't think that all adaptive preferences suffer from the autonomy deficit. Instead, he seeks whatever it is that distinguishes those that do from those that don't. He gives what he claims is a sufficient condition for non-autonomy: if adaptive preferences are formed as a result of oppression or injustice, the actions based on them are nonautonomous; they suffer from an autonomy deficit. Equivalently, he offers a necessary condition on autonomy: if the actions based on a set of adaptive preferences are autonomous, those preferences are not formed as a result of oppression or injustice. In his own words:

My suggestion, then, is that an important class of cases of nonautonomous preferences is those that were shaped (in the appropriate way) under the causal influence of *unjust* conditions, conditions that violate the rights or entitlements of the relevant

agent. You see how this works, most naturally, in the case of the self-starving woman: her relevant preferences were not merely shaped—like all preferences—under the causal influence of all sorts of factors external to her. Crucially, they were shaped under the causal influence of a social order that routinely violates her rights, that wrongs her. Preferences shaped in this way are nonautonomous, even if endorsed. (Enoch, 2020, 185)

So, for instance, the lesbian woman’s preference not to marry is formed as a result of oppression, as is the gay man’s preference for romantic relationships with women, and the preference for malnourishment in the woman living in the very patriarchal society; so these are adaptive preferences with an autonomy deficit. On the other hand, the preferences of the teenager who switches from preferring music over philosophy to preferring philosophy over music are adaptive preferences, and they might give rise to actions that are nonautonomous; but, if they do, it’s not because they are the result of oppression or injustice—remember, Enoch gives a sufficient condition for nonautonomy, but not a necessary one. That adaptation did not arise from oppression or injustice; it arose when she realised the strengths of her natural talents.

4 Worries about Enoch’s criterion

I’d like to raise two worries about Enoch’s criterion.

4.1 Freedom from oppression is not necessary for autonomy

As we have seen, Enoch opts for what he calls a historical-causal criterion by which to distinguish adaptive preferences that suffer from an autonomy deficit from those that don’t—as he notes, he is following in the footsteps of Rosa Terlazzo (2016) in this respect. He does this because he thinks content-based accounts can’t work. On a content-based account, what distinguishes autonomous from nonautonomous adaptive preferences is the content of those preferences. For instance, such an account might hold that the woman’s preference in favour of her husband’s overeating at the cost of her own malnourishment leads to nonautonomous actions because that preference is simply irrational or in some other way bad. The thing preferred is not worthy of such preference; it is something objectively undesirable. However, while the preference for malnourishment may be hard to rationalise in any situation, there are other, less severe adaptive preferences we worry about that can be. For instance, take the following example from Virginia Woolf’s ‘Professions for Women’.¹ Woolf dubs this character,

¹I thank XXX for drawing my attention to this example.

whom she paints as a phantom who haunts her mind as she tries to write something critical about a book by a man, 'The Angel in the House':

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (Woolf, 1931 [2009])

The Angel in the House has extreme preferences, for sure, but preferences that, had they been formed in a different way by a different person, we might consider strange but almost laudable. They show an extreme concern for others, a sort of self-abnegation that sometimes occurs in very altruistic people. Were they formed, then, by a man in a reasonably egalitarian society as a result of reflection and a balanced upbringing, I suspect we wouldn't consider them bad or irrational, and we wouldn't question the autonomy of the actions that flow from them. So, whatever is problematic about the preferences of the Angel in the House, it is not that the content of those preferences is necessarily troubling. It is the process by which they were formed, and Enoch's criterion identifies that: it is because the preferences were formed under oppression that they trouble us.

However, that criterion can't be the whole story. After all, consider the following person. He's a gay man living in a severely homophobic society. He values his self-sufficiency, always preferring to rectify things that go wrong in his life on his own and not depending on others for any help. But soon he comes to realise that rectifying the homophobic oppression of his society and specifically the aspects that he experiences—attacks on the street, intimidation by the police, job insecurity—cannot be achieved by him alone. That is, the option of overcoming these problems by himself is not available to him. Recognising this, he grudgingly joins forces with an activist group, chafing at their commitment to collective action, but reminding himself always that this is his only route to a better life. Over time, however, he comes to value the collective work they undertake in service of their shared goal. Indeed, it becomes a key component of his life; it is a significant part of what gives it meaning and value. If he were now given the option of overturning the homophobia on his own or banding together with his allies, he'd choose the latter, where before he'd have chosen the former. Now, his preference for collective action to overturn oppression is adaptive: he formed it because successful individual action was simply not available to him; he could not achieve his desired goal on his own. And so, while he started out preferring to achieve his goal on his own rather than achieve it collectively, he now prefers achieving it collectively to achieving it on his own. And his preference was formed directly by the oppression he

faces. So the conditions of Enoch's criterion are satisfied. But I'd hesitate to say that choices made, actions taken, and consent given on its basis are nonautonomous.

A similar case: oppressors sometimes restrict our options in ways that prevent us from forming the bad preferences that they form. Consider a society that holds that men should be wholly autonomous authors of their own lives, and thinks they have an innate wisdom that will lead them to form good moral characters without ever being criticized, sanctioned, called to account, or having their options restricted in any way throughout their childhood and beyond; women, on the other hand, are brought up in this society in much the way many people think counts as good parenting in many modern societies—they are given plenty of freedom, but they are also criticized and sanctioned when they behave selfishly, cruelly, or violently. Predictably, men end up with pretty rotten values in this society while women end up with pretty sound ones, having adapted to value the restrictions placed on them during their childhood. It seems this society is oppressive and unjust, treating women as less autonomous and lacking in certain good qualities, such as a sound moral sense, that it imputes to men; and perhaps it is also oppressive and unjust because it fails in its duty to provide men with the moral education they need. And yet the adaptive preferences that the women form are in some objective sense better than the men's non-adaptive preferences, and I'd be reluctant to say the women's preferences, or the choices to which they give rise, lack any autonomy.

Enoch thinks it is necessary for autonomous action that the preferences on which it is based are not adaptive preferences formed in response to oppression. And so, if my judgments about the two sorts of case just presented are correct, they constitute counterexamples to his claim.

4.2 The account threatens to be circular

Enoch rightly rejects what he calls subjectivist accounts that say that the distinguishing feature of adaptive preferences with autonomy deficits is to be found inside the person who has the preferences, perhaps in their higher-order preferences, which disavow those at the first-order level. As he points out, it is in fact a sign of very deep oppression and very troubling adaptive preferences if they are ratified at every level of the hierarchy of preferences. For instance, suppose the gay man in the deeply religious community not only comes to prefer romantic relationships with women, but prefers being someone who prefers that, prefers being someone who prefers being someone who prefers that, and so on. Then that is perfectly consistent with these preferences being adaptive. In such a case, the preferences at each level have adapted, perhaps in a cascade, so that the first-order preferences adapted first because of restrictions on the relationships to which he has access, but then the second-order preferences adapted be-

cause of restrictions on the sort of preferences he could have and the sort of person he could be, which led him to adapt to preferring having those preferences and being that person, and so on up the chain.

However, I think there might be a structurally similar concern about Enoch's own position. After all, a question arises: when is the system that imposed the conditions that led to some adaptive preferences oppressive or unjust? And a partial answer suggests itself: when a system is oppressive or unjust, the people who live under it don't get their preferences satisfied; or, if they do get their preferences satisfied, it is those preferences that are adaptive in the bad way Enoch seeks to identify that are satisfied, not those that are adaptive in the good way or those that are not adaptive at all. But now imagine a system perfectly designed to impose exactly the right pressures that give rise to exactly the adaptive preferences that the system will go on to satisfy. Is this system oppressive or not? It depends, in part, on whether the preferences formed by the people who live under it are adaptive in the bad way or not. But, on Enoch's account, whether they are adaptive in the bad way or not depends, in part, on whether the system is oppressive. So, just as the harmony between different levels of the person's preferences could be a result of very deep oppression or no oppression at all on the subjectivist account that Enoch rejects, so giving rise to adaptive preferences that the system then goes on to satisfy could be the result of very deep oppression or no oppression at all on Enoch's account.

To make this concrete, imagine the following sort of society: in it, the roles available to women require caring for others, while the roles available to men reward pursuing one's own interests. The men and women of this society form adaptive preferences that will be satisfied by the roles available to them: women have more altruistic preferences, caring less about their own well-being and more about the well-being of others, but not extremely altruistic ones; men have more self-centred preferences, but again not extremely self-centred ones. Is the society oppressive? Looking only at the content of their preferences, neither the men nor the women have bad or irrational preferences. While extreme altruism and extreme self-centredness is bad or irrational, the more moderate versions present in this society are all within the bounds of the permissible. What's more, all of these permissible preferences or men and women are satisfied in this society: they have roles that will perfectly satisfy the preferences the society has led them to have, and indeed they formed these preferences because this would be so. So, whether the society is oppressive or not is determined in part by whether these preferences are adaptive in the bad way or not. If their preferences are not adaptive in the bad way, and they are satisfied, we would be reluctant to call it oppressive. But, according to Enoch, whether they are adaptive in the bad way or not depends on whether the society is oppressive. And so a circularity results. The circularity is not an epistemic one: the worry is not that we cannot discover whether the society is op-

pressive or not; the worry is that there is no determinate fact of the matter whether it is or not, because some of the facts that would settle that question are themselves determined by whether or not the society is oppressive.

5 Conclusion

Enoch offers a necessary condition on autonomy: if the actions based on a set of preferences are autonomous, those preferences are not formed as a result of oppression or injustice. But I think it faces two issues: first, there are cases in which preferences formed as a result of oppression nonetheless issue in autonomous choices, actions, and consent; second, whether oppression is present or not is determined in part by the status of the preferences of people in the society, and that status is, in part, determined by whether or not the society is oppressive, and so the account threatens to be circular.

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