Diversifying Syllabi 2015 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

Article/Essay Title: **Adaptive Preference**
Author: H. E. Baber

Readability: <mark>Easy</mark>/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis: The choices that women in economically poor and oppressive circumstances make don't challenge "preference utilitarianism", despite Nussbaum's argument to the contrary. Women in these circumstances often make highly shrewd, calculated decisions and would prefer other options if they had access to them.

Key Definitions:
Preference Utilitarianism/Preferentisim/Subjective Welfarism: a person's good consists in the satisfaction of their true preferences

True preferences: Preferences that are informed, issue from a rational state of mind, not from a sense of moral obligation or duty.

Adaptive preferences: preferences of individuals that are "deformed" by adverse social conditions such as social and political oppression. For example: a woman's preference to stay with an abusive husband.

Brief Summary:

According to a preference utilitarian, a person's "good" is measured simply by the satisfaction of their true preferences.

Nussbaum argues that this cannot be the case—a person's "good" can't be measured simply by the satisfaction of their preferences—because she thinks that satisfying adaptive preferences that are the result of/formed by oppressive social conditions does not contribute to a person's well-being and so preference utilitarianism is false. In other words, she argue that there are cases/counter examples where satisfying a person's preference doesn't in fact add to their well-being (cases where their preferences are "adaptive").

In this paper, Baber argues that Nussbaum's argument doesn't work and therefore doesn't make trouble for the preference utilitarian.

Baber's main points:

Nussbaum's "adaptive preferences" aren't *true* preferences and so don't threaten preference utilitarianism. (They aren't what people would actually *prefer* all things considered and they often aren't preference made with access to full information)

Baber argues that the examples of "adaptive preferences" Nussbaum uses aren't actually what the individuals in question would prefer. And this helps explain why they are badly off: They are badly off because they aren't living the lives they would prefer. And thus, the preference utilitarian doesn't have to worry about these cases.

Examples:

(1) Jamaya: She works for low wages and poor working conditions at a brink kiln where women are paid less than men. She doesn't complain or protest.

Nussbaum: Jamaya doesn't understand that what's happening is wrong, and therefore prefers her circumstances.

Baber: Nope! The absence of felt frustration is not the same as desire satisfaction! She would really prefer a higher raise and better work conditions if they were offered to her. Just because she's not morally outraged by her conditions doesn't mean she *prefers* them.

(2) Vasanti: Stays in an abusive marriage for years.

Nussbaum: Vasanti has a "preference" for the abuse.

Baber: Nope! Vasnati's true preference is likely to have a home and basic necessities without beatings. But, Vasanti reasons that having a home + basic necessities + occasional beatings is better than being homeless+ begging in the street + not beatings.

Choosing X over Y when X and Y are the only options open to you doesn't mean you'd prefer X if you had access to Z.

Baber argues that even in cases where individuals *have* acquired a preferences for conditions we regard as bad, we should still think they are better off if these are satisfied. Getting your preferences maximized is still best (given your circumstance), even if the options open aren't that great. This helps us see what's wrong with unjust institutions—they prevent us from certain options.

Saida: Decides to not give her daughter a formal education.

Nussbaum: Saida prefers to have her daughters uneducated.

Baber: Saida makes a rational calculation. She realizes that even if her daughter is formally educated, it's VERY unlikely she will have the option to get a job. With this fact in mind, she decided that it's better to spend time teaching her daughter how to make a husband happy, since life with an unhappy husband is

worse than life with a happy husband and those are the two realistic options available. Given the probabilities of all the outcomes and the choices open, it would be best if Saida's daughter doesn't go to school. So Saida is badly off in that what she really wants isn't an option, but since she has limited options, choosing a lack of formal education will maximize her good compared to other available alternatives.

Final important point: We shouldn't assume that third-world or impoverished women's choices are made uncritically. We also shouldn't assume that these choices reflect true preferences.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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Possible Applications:

- Units on global justice/poverty issues
- Applied ethics
- Philosophy and public policy
- Units on oppression/internalized oppression

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Martha C. Nussbaum – *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach.* Cambridge University Press, 2001.
Serene Khader – *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment.* Oxford University Press, 2011.
Serene Khader – "Intersectionality and the Ethics of Transnational Commercial Surrogacy." *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 6.1 (2013): 68-90
Jan Elster – *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality.* Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Possible Class Activities:

- If the class agrees with Baber's assessment of Nussbaum's examples, ask them to generate better examples of adaptive preferences. Are there instances of genuine adaptive preferences?
- Break the class into small groups and assign to each group the task of discussing one of Nussbaum's examples.
- Role-playing: Ask the students to imagine themselves as international aid workers/volunteers who are designing interventions in poorer countries. How

would they go about discussing potential aid programs/interventions with the people who would be directly affected/benefited?
- Ask the students to think about their own sets of preferences. What are their own true preferences? How confident can they be about what constitutes their true preferences?

What traditional texts might this text replace?

- This might work as a substitute for other work about desires, preferences, and interests in a moral psychology class.
- This might work as a complement or a substitute for work on assessing well-being in global justice contexts.
- As a substitute/complement for conversations on Socratic questions about whether agents always do what they think is right.
- As a complement/replacement for discussions of Frankfurt-style hierarchies of desires.