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### Rebecca, Rebecca!

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## Rebecca, Rebecca!

### Abstract

Harriet Baber, PhD, Philosophy Department, commented at an invited session, titled Rebecca, Rebecca! on Adaptive Preference at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting in Vancouver on April 20, 2019.

### Disciplines

Philosophy

# Rebecca, Rebecca!

Terlazzo argues that while acquiring an adaptive preference may be may be prospectively bad for a person satisfying it may, nevertheless, be good for her. I agree but suggest an alternative explanation of why from the perspective of an informed preference account of well-being, according to which a person is better off with  $x$  than she is with  $y$  iff she (as a rational, informed, self-interested chooser) prefers  $x$  to  $y$ .

## 1 Rebecca's Adaptive Preference: Prospective and Retrospective Benefits

Terlazzo suggests, sensibly, that Rebecca should not form the preference for a baby at 14 but that, having formed this preference, her well-being is 'retrospectively best served by having and loving *this particular child at this particular time in her life*'.

This is puzzling: intuitively Rebecca should not to have the baby precisely because she will live to regret it. Terlazzo's reading of Rebecca's case however suggests that 'prospectively', before her transformative experience,

(1) Rebecca was going to be better off not having the baby.

but that, 'retrospectively', once the future rolls around

(2) Rebecca is better off having the baby.

*Prima facie* this is at best odd: if Rebecca is better off having the baby, how can it be true of her in the past that she was going to be better off not having the baby?

To appreciate the oddity consider Rebecca's case from the timeless perspective. Let  $t_1$  be a time before Rebecca undergoes her transformative experience, when she is contemplating unprotected sex, considering abortion or, having given birth, deciding whether to keep her baby or to give it up for adoption, or to leave it at a hospital emergency room, firehouse, or church steps. Let  $t_2$  be a later time after Rebecca has had her baby and prefers having it to not having it.

(3) At  $t_1$  Rebecca is not better off having her baby at  $t_2$ .

That is why Rebecca's ideal rational self-interested chooser, who has her interests at heart, advises against keeping the baby. According to Terlazzo, however, Rebecca is later 'retrospectively' better off for having the baby.

(4) At  $t_2$  Rebecca is better off having her baby at  $t_2$ .

The problem is that temporal indices render sentences timeless and additional temporal indices are redundant.<sup>1</sup> (5) is true, was false in the past, but (we hope) will be false in the near future:

(5) Trump is President of the United States.

But (6) is timelessly true and so true at all times:

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<sup>1</sup> Not my official view. Where fission occurs, I argue, we have to double-index. But there's no fission or other funny stuff going on here.

(6) On March 14, 2019 Trump is President of the United States.

If Rebecca is better off having a baby at  $t_2$  then it would seem she is better off having a baby at  $t_2$  at all times, including  $t_1$ . It is hard therefore to understand why, at  $t_1$ , she should be advised not to have the baby.

## 2 Temporal perspectives and extended preferences

How to fix? We do, intuitively, believe that *having formed the preference* to have a baby at  $t_2$  Rebecca is better off having the baby than not having it but also that she would be better off not having the preference and not having baby. I suggest that the Rebecca problem is best understood as a puzzle about interpersonal comparisons of well-being, albeit the relative well-being of counterparts at different possible worlds whose lives, up to a point in time, are indistinguishable, namely Rebecca1 at  $w_1$  who, at  $t_2$  prefers having a baby and has one, Rebecca2 at  $w_2$  who at that time does not prefer having a baby and doesn't have one, and Rebecca3 at  $w_3$  who prefers having a baby at  $t_2$  but doesn't have one.

Without elaboration, however, preferentism does not provide an account of interpersonal comparisons of well-being since the preference-rankings of different people are incommensurable. That is a problem because, intuitively, such comparisons *can* be made, and because they *must* be made for the purpose of formulating social policy.

One way to elaborate preferentism in response is to introduce the notion of *extended preferences*, that is, preferences over *extended alternatives* the descriptions of which include agents' preferences, to ground interpersonal comparisons of well-being. Intuitively, some *extended alternatives*, those that an ideal chooser would prefer, are better than others. Getting  $x$  rather than  $y$  is an ordinary alternative; preferring and getting  $x$  rather than  $y$  is an extended alternative. Preferring to prefer and get  $x$  rather than  $y$  is an extended preference.

Understood in this way the Rebecca Problem as a puzzle about the relative betterness of Rebecca's extended alternatives:

(7) Rebecca prefers not to have a baby at 14 and doesn't.

(8) Rebecca prefers to have a baby at 14 and does.

(9) Rebecca prefers to have a baby at 14 but doesn't.

Rebecca2 is better off than Rebecca1 because Ideal Rebecca, a rational, informed chooser with Rebecca's interests at heart prefers, (7) to (8). But at  $t_2$  (7) is not available and Ideal Rebecca prefers (8) to (9). So given the options available to Rebecca at  $t_2$ , (8) is the best Rebecca can do therefore, at  $t_2$ , having the baby is better for Rebecca than not having the baby. Rebecca2 is better off than Rebecca1, but Rebecca1 is nevertheless better off than Rebecca3, whose ordinary preference for having the baby is frustrated. (3) is true because at  $t_1$  (7) is available and (7) is better for Rebecca than (8). (4) is true because at  $t_2$  (7) is not available so (8) is the best that Rebecca can do. At any time Ideal Rebecca chooses from options that are available at that time. At  $t_1$ , therefore, therefore chooses not having the baby at  $t_2$  but that option is not available at  $t_2$  so then she chooses having the baby at  $t_2$ .

At every time in our lives, we see a branching structures of possibilities ahead of us. As we progress through time, however, branches get lopped off and what was once possible for us ceases to be possible. Ideal Rebecca (a.k.a Mom) prefers (7) to (8) at *all* times and so, at  $t_1$ , when that is still a possibility for Rebecca, she recommends against having the baby. Rebecca ignores her advice so, at  $t_2$  that possibility is no longer available. Ideal Rebecca sighs, noting that at least (8) is better than (9) so, apropos of (4), agrees that at  $t_2$  Rebecca is better off having her baby at  $t_2$ . (4) poses the question: better off than *what*? Better off, Ideal Rebecca says, then with any other alternative *available* to Rebecca at  $t_2$ .

Understood in this way, the mechanism by which Rebecca's preference was formed is irrelevant. All that matters are Rebecca's ideal extended preferences, which are stable and impervious to 'transformative experience', and what is available to her at any given time. So one question I have for Terlazzo is whether there is anything wrong with adaptive preference as such, including the 'worrisome' ones, that are overridden by 'transformative experience'.

Another question in this regard. While it may be that adaptive preferences are typically bad for people because forming and satisfying them closes off opportunities to achieve better extended alternatives—what if they close off what a rational informed chooser would recognize as *worse* alternatives. My child has no interest in going to college and aspires to blue-collar work but I close off that possibility. I make it clear that not going to college is not an option and organize his life in such a way that he must go to college and will be restricted to a narrow range of 'good' jobs for which he eventually acquires an adaptive preference. I did that, and made it clear to my kids that if they didn't graduate from college and achieve upper middle class lives I would cut them off and curse them. Is that bad? Does my kids' acquisition of the preference for an upper middle class jobs and life in response my bribing, bullying, and threatening constitute a 'transformative experience'?

Finally, while I appreciate Terlazzo's distinction between having a baby and having this particular baby I don't see how it figures in this discussion and look for an explanation. Rebecca4 at  $w_4$  has a different baby whom she, as a consequence of transformative experience, prefers to raise. I can't see how preferring to have 'this baby' at 'this particular time in her life' makes a difference to Rebecca's case. Whatever baby Rebecca has she will, after 'transforming experience', prefer having it to not having it.

On the account I'm assuming, the causal story of how (ordinary, non-extended) preferences are formed has no bearing on whether, or the extent to which, their satisfaction contributes to well-being. It doesn't matter whether they were formed by intentional 'character planning' or by adaptive preference in response to deprivation, domination, or injustice, by genetic hardwiring, brainwashing, or neural intervention. All that matters is their compatibility with informed, rationally considered extended preferences and, at any time, the feasibility of satisfying them.

### 3 Concluding Cynical Postscript: It doesn't matter what you want as long as you get it

(I won't read this at session)

Most people most of the time can't get what they want and are better off wanting what they can get.

Dominated Housewife is doing the best she can because her only other alternatives—Walmart cashiering or other boring pink-collar drudge work, are far worse than being a dominated housewife. Housewifing is a good job. Housewives organize their work as they please and work without the close supervision characteristic of menial work in the labor force. Unlike most pink-collar work, housewifing is largely manual labor: housewives can move around; they are not trapped in confined spaces like cashiers, call-center workers, or receptionists. And, unlike most workers, they work to the task not to the time. If a housewife produces a clean house and good dinner for the lord and master when he comes home, and good sex, she doesn't have to spend additional time 'looking busy'. Sucking up to the lord and master is a small price to pay for that freedom. Privileged observers who can't imagine the pure hell of what is commonly known as 'real work' don't get it. The value of 'autonomy', 'dignity' and other such rubbish is greatly exaggerated by privileged observers who cannot imagine what it would be like to do 'real work' long-term and don't see pink-collar drudge work as a real and present danger to themselves or their daughters.

Since it is not feasible for most women to get anything but boring, dead-end pink-collar drudge work outside the home, Dominated Housewife as a rational chooser *of course* prefers housewifing even at the cost of domination. And if she can form a taste for domination she will be even better off. It is best for women to form adaptive preferences for what is available: to train from an early age to be deferential and pleasing to men, to diet, dress, and groom to be appealing to high-yielding men who can and will support them so that they can avoid work outside the home. Or, failing that, to condition, drug, or lobotomize them so that if they cannot snag high-yielding men to liberate them from the labor force, they are better able to tolerate pink-collar drudgery which, for most of us, is the only alternative. Life still sucks for women. If you have to do womanshit, as most women must, it's best to be brain-dead.

But it doesn't have to be so. Social arrangements can and should be revised in the interests of making it possible for women, and men, to satisfy their ideal extended preferences to avoid domination as well as poverty, drudgery, and boredom. In the end, the fault is almost never in ourselves but almost always in our stars. The promotion of 'consciousness-raising' and other programs intended to undermine adaptive preference is insulting. Improving the material conditions of people's is all that matters.