Global ethicists and development practitioners have recognized the following problem: people in oppressive situations sometimes think and behave in ways that seem to conflict with their own well-being. For example, a woman might hold the belief that a good woman sacrifices her own nourishment so that her husband may eat, or she might feel shame at being seen in public and live in isolation at home. The term ‘inappropriately adaptive preferences’ (IAPs) describes this sort of situation, in which people’s desires conform to less than optimal living situations. The question is: how can development practitioners understand these IAPs and intervene, while maximally respecting the agency and cultures of people who have them? In *Adaptive Preferences and Women’s Empowerment*, Serene Khader offers a comprehensive account of IAPs and argues for a deliberative approach to intervention, with the ultimate aim of promoting women’s empowerment in the midst of deprivation and oppression.

The text is written for academic feminists and philosophers, as well as for development practitioners. It is bursting with illuminating examples of real people and situations, taken from the work of activists, sociologists and other field workers. For example, Khader introduces the text with a discussion of women of the village of El Pital, where husbands restrict their wives’ mobility. Khader also shares Andrea Cornwall’s ethnographic work, which illustrates the limited career choices faced by Yoruba women traders in Nigeria. Khader’s book exemplifies the
practical importance of good theory: it can deepen our understanding of difficult, real-world problems and to improve our practices in implementing solutions. Her constant engagement with the implications of development theory and her sensitivity to the complexity of the lived experiences of oppressed people manifests in her level-headed and careful proposal.

One important contribution of this text is a much-needed definition of the term ‘IAPs.’ The previous lack of an authoritative definition is unacceptable from both the perspective of both philosophers and practitioners. Khader defines IAPs as ‘preferences inconsistent with basic flourishing that are formed under conditions nonconductive to basic flourishing and that we believe people might be persuaded to transform upon normative scrutiny of their preferences and exposure to conditions more conducive to flourishing’ (p. 42). These preferences often form under conditions of extreme deprivation, in regions where poverty is widespread.

In Chapter One, Khader outlines her view of how public institutions ought to respond to IAPs. According to her ‘deliberative perfectionist’ approach, practitioners work with women to help them to identify what well-being means to them and to consider whether their beliefs and behaviors are consistent with that view. Khader’s approach is perfectionist because it is premised on the view that ‘there is an objective good for human beings and this good lies in flourishing – developing and living in accordance with human nature’ (p. 18). The approach is deliberative because the conception of flourishing that guides the intervention is one that is arrived at cooperatively between development practitioners and those with IAPs.

Development intervention can be fraught with hazards, including the possibility of incorrectly identifying IAPs; of misunderstanding how and why IAPs are formed; of engaging in paternalism; and of failing to respect and protect cultural diversity. Any of these errors can cause
harm to the people who practitioners are seeking to empower. Part of Khader’s strategy for mitigating these harms is presented in Chapters Two and Three, where she works to correct misrepresentations of women with IAPs as wholly lacking in autonomy or agency. Representations of Third World women as deluded, as unable to make choices and act according to their values, or as completely lacking in a sense of self-worth are not only inaccurate, but they can only result in poor handling of interventions.

In Chapters Four and Five, Khader defends her approach with respect to questions of paternalism and cultural diversity. She explains that the aim of deliberative intervention is not to alter someone’s deepest values, to change a group’s culture, or to offer an alternate conception of basic flourishing than the one that is operating. Khader assumes – and she asks that the practitioner take the stance – that people tend to get these things right on their own for the most part. Instead, she explains, ‘Interventions should be conceived as attempts to help people clarify and evaluate their conceptions of the good rather than as attempts to replace their conceptions of the good with external ones’ (p. 153). In order for interventions to remain respectful of alternate conceptions of the good life, Khader holds that development practitioners should work with a vague and minimal conception of flourishing.

In tackling a problem that has both theoretical and practical dimensions, Khader confronts a number of challenges. For one, Khader argues extensively for the view that IAPs are not the same thing as autonomy deficits. The contrary position – the view that those with IAPs lack autonomy – risks justifying coercion in response to IAPs. Nevertheless, it does seem that there is some relation between IAPs and autonomy. After all, successful interventions are likely to enhance autonomy defined in procedural terms. For example, one criterion of autonomy
Khader addresses is having full information. Sometimes IAPs result from lack of information, like not knowing that consuming unboiled water puts the health of one’s family and oneself at risk. An intervention could correct this lack of knowledge. Another aspect of autonomy is reflectiveness. Khader argues persuasively that IAPs can be formed even upon reflection, but it is also the case that deliberation enhances and deepens reflection, encouraging deprived persons to consider an expanded option set and to imagine different ways of living and different futures. If interventions on IAPs promote autonomy, but IAPs are not to be thought of as autonomy deficits, we may wonder what precisely is the relation between IAPs and autonomy.

Another challenge Khader faces concerns her call for practitioners to work with a vague conception of flourishing. Defining ‘flourishing,’ however, may be important both practically and philosophically. In terms of development practice, we might ask whether one can genuinely claim to leave the definition of ‘flourishing’ to be developed only through cross-cultural deliberation while still holding a strong enough view to deem intervention necessary. In terms of the way ‘flourishing’ operates conceptually in the text, Khader leaves the term virtually undefined except to equate it with ‘well-being,’ and we are left to rely mostly on our intuitions of what it might mean. And yet, the definitions of ‘IAPs’ and of ‘empowerment’ both depend on it.

One way to understand these problems is to think of them as reflecting a tension between an imperative to supply – precisely and explicitly – the normative standards that are motivating this philosophical project and IAP interventions, and the practical necessity of leaving those standards vague. Khader skillfully balances these competing demands, and if she does not fully resolve the tension, she sets an authoritative foundation upon which others may pursue these
questions. Khader’s analysis of IAPs is both highly original and solidly supported, making this work essential reading for those interested in global ethics.

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