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REASON AND AUTONOMY

By Keith Lehrer

I. Introduction

Reason has co-opted our conception of autonomy. My purpose is to set autonomy free. Here is the problem: some philosophers, Kant most notably, have said that governing your life by reason or by being responsive to reason is the source of autonomy.[1] But there is a paradox concealed in these plausible claims. On the one hand, a person can be enslaved to reason and lack autonomy because of this kind of bondage. On the other hand, if reason has no influence, then it appears that one would be the slave of one's passions, and, however eloquently Hume might have written about reason being the slave of the passions,[2] there is something odd about the idea that a person who is enslaved by his passions is autonomous. The paradox, which I shall call *the paradox of reason*, is that if we are governed by reason in what we choose, then we are in bondage to reason in what we choose, and we are not autonomous. Yet, if we are not governed by reason, then we do not govern ourselves in what we choose, and again we are not autonomous.

I do not think that this paradox is a mere sophism of philosophy. At the level of phenomenology, we might feel that if we are governed by reason, then we are constrained by it, and if we are not governed by reason, then we are not in control. For to be governed by reason is to be moved by rational considerations in how we choose to act and live, but being moved by rational considerations, by the rational choice of means to ends, for example, is a form of causation. Once the concept of autonomy is properly understood, though, we can resolve the paradox. The resolution requires that we understand that whether we are governed by reason must be an autonomous choice even when we are governed by reason in this choice. This raises the question, however, of which comes first, the choice to be governed by reason, or the governance of reason in the choice. Thus, the paradox deepens. For if, on the one hand, the choice to be governed by reason precedes any governance of choice by reason, then this initial choice is not governed by reason, and we are not autonomous. On the other hand, if the choice to be governed by reason is governed by reason, then we are constrained by reason and not autonomous in the

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959).

[2] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: John Noon, 1739), bk. II, sec. III.

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choice. Which comes first, we might ask, the autonomous choice to be governed by reason or the governance of reason in autonomous choice? Whatever the answer, it appears that the conclusion is that we are not autonomous in that choice.

To resolve the problem, we shall need a clear conception of autonomy and an analysis of autonomy that is adequate to extricate ourselves from the paradox. Freedom and autonomy are closely connected, and it is, in terms of ordinary usage, difficult to distinguish between them. However, freedom seems more closely connected with not being constrained by external and internal conditions, while autonomy seems to require some positive condition of being empowered. I shall not make too much of the distinction, however, because once one becomes philosophically reflective about freedom, one begins to demand an account of positive empowerment in a satisfactory account of freedom. Thus, freedom and autonomy get joined. It is, however, important to keep in mind that there are many forms of freedom (freedom to do what one chooses, for example) that are greatly valued even if they do not ensure autonomy. But what is autonomy?

II. Internal Autonomy: Beyond Desire

I shall offer an account of autonomy as an internal condition. The account could easily be expanded to include external conditions of freedom, but that is not my concern here. I am interested in the internal conditions that must be satisfied for the will to be autonomous, for us to be autonomous in choice, putting aside any external conditions. So let us look at the internal conditions. Desire or some stronger conative state is a natural starting point. Are we autonomous when we do what we desire? Some philosophers, such as Harry G. Frankfurt, for example, argue that we have free will when we do what we desire, with the proviso that we have a higher-order desire, that is, a second-order desire with which we are satisfied, that endorses our first-order desire.[3] It must be conceded to such a position that a person will claim that he is acting of his own free will when he does what he desires and, moreover, when he desires to have the desire in question. However, if the matter is left without further comment or qualification, doubts easily arise. Suppose that a person's desire, and even the desire for the desire, are not subject to the supervision of reason. Whatever the person desires, looking inward he desires to desire, and, looking outward, he does. We might imagine that the person just automatically desires to desire what he desires without reflection or the intervention of rational processes. Given conflict between desires, this may appear unrealistic, but it is not difficult to imagine a person so constructed that his desires, though they conflict, are automatically ordered. Perhaps his desires are ordered by

[3] Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–20.

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some internal mechanism, perhaps by the intervention of another, with ties between equally appealing desires arbitrarily resolved, so that the highest-ranked desire brings with it a desire for that desire. The person does what he desires and desires to desire. The person will feel as though he is acting of his free will.

Would we agree that such a person is acting autonomously? When we reflect that harmony between first- and second-order desires arises automatically by an internal mechanism of which the agent may be innocent, it appears that the answer is negative. Simply put, it might not be up to an agent that she does what she desires, and it might not be up to the agent that she desires what she does or, furthermore, that she has the second-order desire that automatically accords with her first-order desire. The desires favor the act at all levels, but it is not up to the agent that she desires what she does at the first or second level. Moreover, desire does not seem sufficient to express autonomy, whether a desire is a first- or second-order desire, because desires may arise in us quite automatically and in a way that is indifferent to our approval or rational evaluation. The same could be true of even higher order desires. The appropriate state to express autonomy should be one that we choose, that is up to us, rather than a state such as being desirous, which in many instances, perhaps the most typical, arises in us without our approval or consent. This is what motivates the idea that autonomous choice should be the expression of rational processes, or at least subject to the supervision of rational processes. In short, the objection is that autonomous choice should be directed by or, at least, approved and evaluated by an agent who is engaged in rational processes. But there is nothing in desire, whether at the first or second level, to ensure any connection with evaluation or rational processes whatever.

It should be further noted that in the most natural use of the expression "desire," a person sometimes autonomously chooses to do something that the person has no desire to do. As I contemplate filling out my tax form, I am as certain as I am about any aspect of my psychology that I have no desire to fill out my tax form. I do not think that I am at all unusual in this respect. Someone might object that I might have a desire to avoid the consequences of not completing the form, and about this they would be right. But, in addition, I am convinced of the importance of taxation. I am convinced of the utility of it. I vote against candidates who would lower or eliminate taxes. I am convinced, as a result of reflecting on the appropriate role of government, of the importance of taxation in a democratic society. I also see the importance, of course, of balancing public expenditure and private wealth, but I approve of taxation, though I do not desire to be taxed or to fill out my tax form to pay my taxes. My approval, indeed, my moral approval of taxation, does not produce a desire for it. In terms of desire, I am like everyone else who desires not to pay taxes and not to fill out tax forms.

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Now, I may be mistaken in my views about taxation. I consider myself fallible in this matter as in other matters, and so I see that those who are opposed to taxation on libertarian grounds have an argument. Rational reflection leads me to the opposite conclusion, however. When I pay my taxes and fill out the tax form to pay my taxes, I am following the directive of my rational consideration. But I still have no desire whatever to subject myself to the very unpleasant task of filling out the form or, for that matter, writing a check and parting with my money. It is just that I am convinced that this is what I ought to do. I simply do not have a desire to do what I am convinced I ought to do. I choose to do what I think I ought to do because of reasons that I have for thinking that I ought to do it, without desire nudging me to do what I think that I ought to do. *Pace* Hume, reason need not serve the passions. It has other business. I do not have to wait for a desire to arise in me to drive my sense of obligation to action. I am autonomous in the matter; it is up to me whether I go where reason and obligation direct. I do not, having reflected on what I ought to do and having reached a conclusion, sit by helplessly waiting for some desire to lead me to act. It is up to me, whether I like or dread this fact, and I am the author of my choice.

III. Preference and Metamental Ascent

Still, one might ask, "Isn't there some disposition, perhaps not desire, that leads me to choose what I am convinced I ought to do?" Am I not disposed to do what I am convinced by reason that I ought to do? The answer is affirmative. I prefer to do what I am convinced I ought to do, even though I do not desire to do what I am convinced I ought to do. People often prefer to do what they desire, but not always, as the example of filling out tax forms illustrates. But even in the tax case there is a difference between preference and desire. I may prefer to satisfy a desire or prefer not to satisfy the desire, or I may prefer to ignore a desire and do what I consider to be rational or obligatory without thereby satisfying the desire. So it is crucial for us to distinguish between preference and desire. My theory of the matter, which I have articulated in some detail elsewhere, is that a philosophically satisfactory theory of the mind will distinguish between a first-order state of desire and a higher-order state of preference, which differs from desire, including even higher order desires.[4] The choice of the words "desire" and "preference" seems appropriate to my theoretical usage, but neither ordinary nor philosophical usage is consistent on this linguistic point. So my usage requires some elucidation and illustration.

[4] Keith Lehrer, *Self-Trust: A Study of Reason, Knowledge, and Autonomy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 11–12.

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Let us begin with garden-variety desires, the kind that often arise in us in confusion. I desire to paint Finger Rock Canyon. I also desire to meet Jennifer for coffee to discuss virtue. Moreover, the weather is perfect for a swim at the Recreation Center, and so I have a desire for a swim. There is a conflict among my desires because I cannot arrange to satisfy all of these desires. I must decide which of the desires I prefer to satisfy. I move, almost imperceptibly, from desire to the metamental level of the evaluation of desire. The metamental level of evaluation is a higher-order level of evaluation of a first-order mental state. Evaluation of desires may lead me to deliberate, though it need not. I may have a fixed intention resulting from prior reflection to give priority to one sort of desire, the desire to paint, for example, having reflected that unless I paint when the spirit moves me, when the desire and impulse are present, I shall lack inspiration. I think of *preference* as a disposition to choose given the opportunity, which incorporates higher-order evaluation. The distinction between first-order desire and preference to satisfy a desire becomes apparent as soon as conflict arises among our desires. When conflict arises, we confront the need to decide which desire we prefer to satisfy.

It should be noted that this metamental ascent to evaluation and preference is a feature of our mental and metamental capacities. I am not arguing that it is impossible to resolve conflict without metamental ascent. I am claiming, on the basis of observation, that we do it this way. We are able to place our desires before the bar of judgment and evaluate their merits. Moreover, such a perspective often enables us to see how to resolve conflict and maximize the satisfaction of desires. The evaluation of desires must enter into this process if we are moral and rational. Some desires are immoral and others irrational, so reflection on how to satisfy our desires typically presupposes evaluation of desires and the formation of preferences concerning which ones to satisfy. Even so, it is possible to imagine a creature who is incapable of metamental ascent with exactly the same dispositions to choose as we possess. There is an obvious argument to this conclusion.

Imagine a most rational person, Kant perhaps, who seeks to form all preferences by rational deliberation and who chooses throughout his life in accord with those rational preferences. Now imagine a second being, Pseudokant, who completely lacks any capacity for higher-order evaluation but has exactly the same dispositions to choose as Kant does. Pseudokant lacks preference as I construe the notion because he lacks the capacity for higher-order evaluation, but he may have the same dispositions to choose as Kant does when confronted with desires and conflicting desires, though Pseudokant's dispositions are all embedded in his first-order mind. So what is the advantage of metamental ascent and higher-order evaluation? The process is heuristic and provides for our plasticity, our ability to change, to change our principles, and even to change how we change. We might have been made as first-order creatures with un-

reflective principles and dispositions for conflict resolution. But then we would lack the plasticity to change our principles for choice because we could not override them. Given our metamental capacity, we can both evaluate how to choose and how to change how we choose. Of course, we can imagine, once again, Pseudokant always choosing in the same way that Kant or any other rational person does. There is no difficulty, in principle, in imagining the existence of such a being as Pseudokant, however difficult it might be to imagine how he came to be. The claim that we choose by evaluating our desires is supported by observation and explained by the heuristic of metamental plasticity, that is, plasticity resulting from our higher-order mental life. Moreover, our autonomy depends on this metamental capacity and the plasticity of our mental life. Autonomy without plasticity is a contradiction.

Of course, preference, even when autonomous, may be principled. One use of principle, and an important one, is to have a rule of thumb for the satisfaction of unproblematic desires in order to provide for an economy of effort. We do not need to reflect on the question of whether to satisfy each desire that arises because some desires are innocuous. Such desires may be satisfied without deliberation in ordinary circumstances, for example, drinking a glass of water from the tap when one is thirsty and has a desire to drink. The satisfaction of such a desire without thinking about whether to satisfy it or not in ordinary circumstances is neither irrational nor immoral. Suppose then that one satisfies such a desire without reflection. Does it follow that one is, therefore, operating exactly like Pseudokant responding entirely at the first level? Some unreflective behavior is no doubt automatic, but we should not assume that the preference to satisfy desires without reflecting upon them is entirely controlled at the first level. The higher-order certification of some desires in ordinary circumstances remains, when we are autonomous, under the power and influence of the metamind. The rule or principle to satisfy such desires without deliberation is a rule of thumb that is defeasible and may be overridden. The role of the rule is rather like an intention to satisfy such desires, as Michael E. Bratman analyzes intention.[5] An intention, as he analyzes it, may direct choice without reflection but is open to reconsideration and, indeed, alteration. We see this when circumstances change. If there is concern about whether the water might be degraded or poisoned, we become more reflective about whether to drink. To convince oneself of this, consider the way in which we unreflectively satisfy the desire to open mail that is addressed to us, until circumstances change and raise our suspicions about whether our mail might be contaminated and whether there could be danger in following the usual rule of thumb. We then see that the rule or principle that embodied our preference is not an auto-

[5] Michael E. Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

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matic first-order operation, but is an intention to follow a rule under metamental supervision and is subject to reconsideration and revision.

IV. Autonomous Preference

Now let us turn from our account of preference to the promised account of autonomous preference. Frankfurt has insisted, and correctly so, on the importance of higher-order desires.[6] He suggests that freedom requires that first-order desires must accord with second-order desires for us to act freely. There has been much controversy about whether a person whose first- and second-order desires are in accord therefore acts freely in the satisfaction of the first-order desire. The question is whether such accord among our desires is sufficient for freedom. One might think it necessary to add some counterfactual condition to the effect that if one had a first-order desire to act otherwise, one would have acted otherwise, and whether if one had a second-order desire to have a different first-order desire, one would have had a different first-order desire. However, it seems essential to note that such additional requirements would be unrealistic. First-order desires do not ordinarily disappear when we evaluate them negatively, as immoral, irrational, or just undeserving of satisfaction. If second-order desires were like first-order desires, that is, genuine desires arising in us as desires do, then they would not necessarily disappear as a result of negative evaluation either. The distinction between second-order desires and preferences is that the latter, unlike the former, are states of evaluation, positive evaluation, that ascend beyond the first level to the evaluation of it. Thus, we require the metamental ascent to preference in order to make sense of autonomy.

Moreover, just as accord among our desires is not sufficient for autonomous preference, it is not necessary either. Conflict among desires is compatible with autonomous preference. Indeed, we are acutely aware of our autonomy when we have a conflict between our desires. For then we are forced to reflect upon our desires and form a preference, hopefully an autonomous preference, for the satisfaction of some but not all of our desires, or, perhaps, for none of them. Moreover, the conflict among desires may be a conflict among desires at different levels. I might have a desire to eat some rich food laden with butter. I might have a second-order desire not to have such a desire because of a concern for the effect of butter on my arteries and a desire to have healthy arteries. I might even have a third-order desire to be a more fatalistic character who was not so concerned about his health. And so forth. I might be rife with conflicting desires that articulate themselves at different levels without my freedom or autonomy being infringed upon in a significant way. Indeed, I may take some pleasure in looking upon all these unruly desires and putting

[6] Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," 5–20.

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them in some order to form a preference about whether to satisfy the desire to eat the buttery food on this occasion. It is, I might reflect, up to me and in my power to determine which of these desires I shall prefer to satisfy. I might find this reflection to be a source of satisfaction, seeing myself as empowered to choose, or a source of anxiety, seeing myself as responsible for the choice. Which desires, if any, I evaluate positively and prefer to satisfy is up to me, however, when I am autonomous in my preference.

Having noted that autonomy pertains to preference rather than desire, the question immediately arises as to what is required for a preference to be autonomous. Should we say that it is the nature of preference to provide autonomy? Are higher-order evaluation and the formation of preference necessarily autonomous? The usual objection is that preference, even if metamental, does not provide us with a secure prophylactic against manipulation. Although we are concerned with the autonomy of an internal state, that is, preference, rather than the success of action in the external world, we recognize that compulsion, whether it originates internally or externally, threatens autonomy. Indeed, the objection might proceed, metamental ascent merely provides us with greater cognitive advantages. As a result of metamental ascent, we might know what we desire and what the merits and demerits of satisfying a desire are, but such information, though it might ensure us against some forms of ignorance about our desires, does not ensure us against other forms of manipulation. For our metamental evaluations and resulting preferences might themselves be under the control of another agent. How we evaluate and what we prefer might be in his power, not ours. In this case, our preferences, no matter how rational and moral they might appear to us, could be a reflection of the power that another has over us rather than an exercise of our autonomy. The ascent to preference is necessary for autonomy, but it is not sufficient to ensure it.

What must we add to preferences to ensure that they are autonomous? Will higher-order preferences or counterfactual conditions concerning preferences provide the needed prophylactic? Suppose, for example, that moving from the inflexibility of desire to the plasticity of preference, we consider whether a higher-order preference for a lower level of preference suffices for autonomy of the lower-level preference. It is clear from our considerations of higher-order desires why this higher-order preference for a lower preference does not suffice for the autonomy of the latter. The entire preference structure, from the lowest to the highest level preference, might be in the control of another agent and be manipulated by this other agent.

Consider, then, the addition of counterfactual conditions, ones to the effect that if I had preferred to have other preferences than I do, then I would have had other preferences. Thus, for example, suppose that if I had preferred at the second level not to have my preference to paint

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Finger Rock Canyon, then I would not have had my first-order preference to paint it, even, though, in fact, I have a first-order preference to paint it. Does this ensure, as G. E. Moore once suggested concerning choice, that I am free or autonomous?[7] Unfortunately, it does not, and the objection is familiar from the discussion concerning Moore and his followers. The second-order preference might not be in my control but again may be manipulated by another agent. Thus, even if my first-order preference would have been different if my second-order preference had been different, this does not ensure that I am autonomous in the first-order preference, because I might not be autonomous in the second-order preference. The latter might not be under my control.

In an earlier attempt to meet this objection, I suggested iterating the counterfactual condition and requiring that if I had preferred at any level to have a different preference at the next lower level, then I would have had a different preference at the next lower level.[8] My purpose was to ensure that I had an answer to the question of whether my preference at any level is in my power. My answer to the question of whether the preference at some specified level is in my power would be that if I had preferred to prefer otherwise at the specified level, then I would have preferred otherwise at that level. Is this counterfactual condition sufficient for the preference being in my power? Again, there is a difficulty concerning control raised by Peter Van Inwagen[9] and Krister Segerberg.[10] It is that the sequence of higher-order preferences and the counterfactual conditions concerning preferences might be in the control of another agent. Imagine that what I do prefer and what I would prefer if I had preferred to prefer otherwise are completely controlled by another. To get specific about the control, suppose that a small computer chip was secretly installed in my brain. Call it, as I have, a "braino," which enables an external operator to determine what preferences I have. In fact, all of my preferences are controlled by the operator. It might then be true that if I had preferred to have other preferences, I would have had other preferences, but this is because the operator with the braino would have determined that I had other preferences. It is not my autonomy but his control of the braino that determines what preference I do have and, moreover, would have at each level.

To capture the notion of autonomy, something more is required than just preference, something more than just preferences over preferences, and something more than counterfactual influence of preferences over

[7] G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), chap. 6.

[8] Keith Lehrer, "Preferences, Conditionals, and Freedom," in Keith Lehrer, *Metamind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), chap. 3, reprinted from Peter Van Inwagen, ed., *Time and Cause: Essays Presented to Richard Taylor* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Reidel, 1980).

[9] Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), chap. 4.

[10] Krister Segerberg, "Could Have but Did Not," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1983): 230–41.

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preferences. But what? Someone might be inclined to give up the quest for explanation at this point and just answer, "autonomy." A philosopher will not give up the quest for explanation, however, until there is proof that none can be given. For it is the goal of philosophy, and of this philosopher, to explain as much as possible and to leave as little unexplained as we must. One further attempt at explanation is to appeal to a notion of agency or agent causality. Thomas Reid (1710–96) suggests that liberty requires that I determine my volitions, which include my preferences, and that this suffices.[11] Reid uses the notion of "liberty" as I do "autonomy," so Reid would claim that to be autonomous in my preferences, I must be the cause of them. Others, most notably Richard Taylor[12] and Roderick M. Chisholm,[13] have reintroduced this doctrine into discussion in the latter part of the twentieth century. Some have found the notion of agent causality to be unintelligible, but Reid argues that this is the primary notion of causality, though unanalyzable. Other notions of causality, Reid alleges, are but metaphorical extensions of it. So to ensure the presence of autonomy and to avoid the problem of manipulation, Reid might just have added that the autonomous agent must be the cause of his or her preferences. Should we settle for this solution?

Seeking to explain as much as we can and to leave as little unexplained as we must, we need to ask whether we can analyze this notion of agent causality. I suggest that we need not take the notion as primitive, but that we can explain it. So let us take a few further steps toward explanation. First of all, let us make explicit the notion of a preference structure concerning some action *A*. By this I shall mean a first-order preference concerning action *A* and other, higher-order preferences pertaining to action *A*. One simple example of a preference structure would be a preference to paint Finger Rock Canyon, a second-order preference to have this first-order preference, and a third-order preference to have the second-order preference, and so on up the orders of preference as far as they extend. This is an integrated structure of level-specific preference without conflict. As we noted above, however, autonomous preference may be based on a preference structure that contains conflict. Moreover, the higher-order preferences need not be stratified by levels, that is, they need not be level-specific. For example, a preference concerning all of my preferences pertaining to action *A* would not be level-specific.

Moreover, autonomous preference need not depend on an infinite hierarchy of preference, though an infinite hierarchy of preferences is possible. We can suppose that a person has an infinite hierarchy, especially an integrated one, since preferences are functional states, not occurrent states.

[11] Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, 8th ed., William Hamilton, ed. (Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), Essay 4.

[12] Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

[13] Roderick M. Chisholm, "Freedom and Action," in Keith Lehrer, ed., *Freedom and Determinism* (New York: Random House, 1966), 11–44.

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A functional state is, like a dispositional state, one that is a standing state having a certain role and functioning in a determinate manner in thought, reasoning, and choice. Moreover, since preferences are functional states, there is no need to suppose that they can be understood in a momentary intuition. The understanding of them may itself be computational or functional. In the simple example considered above, there is no difficulty with computing higher-order preferences from lower-level ones or, for that matter, lower-level preferences from higher-order ones. The computational rule says this: to go up a preference level, just add a preference to the last preference considered, and to go down a preference level, just delete the last preference from the last preference considered. However, an infinite hierarchy of preferences is neither sufficient for autonomy, as we noted above, nor necessary, for reasons that we shall now consider.

An autonomous preference may be level-ambiguous and incorporate conflict. Suppose, for example, that I consider all preferences that I have concerning an action *A* and find that, whatever conflicts or other peculiarities I discern, I am satisfied with the preference structure just as it is. I evaluate it positively. Thus, I prefer to have this preference structure, including all of my preferences pertaining to action *A*—to writing this essay, for example. I might prefer to have this preference. Indeed, I do. This is not without conflict, but all things considered, I prefer to have all the preferences that I do concerning writing this essay. Notice, however, that this very preference to have the preferences that I do concerning writing this essay is, itself, a preference concerning writing this essay. So this preference, being a preference for having the preference structure containing all my preferences concerning writing the essay, is contained in the preference structure because it is also a preference concerning writing this essay. This preference for the preference structure is not level-specific. This preference for the preference structure is a preference for the preferences within the preference structure. Since the preferences within the preference structure are preferences of differing levels, the preference for those preferences is not level-specific.

Let us call this preference for the preference structure, or more personally, my preference for my preference structure to do *A*, my *power preference* concerning *A*. I shall argue that such a preference empowers me and is the basis of my autonomy. A philosopher who is determined to stratify preferences by levels might suppose that it would be possible to assign the power preference a higher level than any of the preferences in the preference structure. It is a preference "over" the preferences in the preference structure. This attempt to assign a level to the power preference, in addition to being a deviant notion of "level," would be a mistake, however. The reason noted above is that the power preference is itself a preference in the preference structure pertaining to *A*. The power preference is a preference concerning preferences pertaining to action *A*. Thus,

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my preference for the preference structure loops back onto itself in the preference structure. It is a preference for all of the preferences in the preference structure, including itself. This is the secret source of the power of the preference.

The loop of the power preference back onto itself in the preference structure is a special feature of the autonomy of preference. Consider my preference for *A*. Now suppose that a question arises as to the autonomy of the preference. I might try to assure myself or another agent that the preference is autonomous by appealing to a preference for that preference. But this will leave the question of the autonomy of that next level preference unanswered. One might, of course, argue that the first preference to do *A* is autonomous because of the second preference for the first, even if the second preference is not autonomous, but this would leave us with the need to explain how a second preference that is not autonomous could be sufficient to ensure the autonomy of the first preference. One might just insist that it is sufficient without explanation, but that would leave us with an unexplained "surd," and one seeking, as I do, to explain as much as possible, will not be satisfied with a "surd."

To avoid the "surd," one might embrace a regress and add a third preference for the second, a fourth for the third, to answer the question of whether the first preference is autonomous. So one might embrace a regress of explanations to avoid the "surd." The infinite regress, though it is not vicious because preferences are functional states, is not satisfying either. For it leaves open the question of whether the infinite sequence is autonomous. By contrast, the power preference answers all questions about preferences concerning preferences pertaining to *A* in a single preference, the preference for the preference structure. Since this preference loops back onto itself as a preference in the preference structure, it contains within itself a preference for itself and avoids the "surd" and the regress. The question whether it is preferred is answered by the preference itself without need to appeal to another preference, and the explanation for why it is autonomous is that it is preferred in a way that is sufficient to ensure that it and all the other preferences in the preference structure are preferences that the agent prefers to have. A power preference ties the preferences in the preference structure up, down, and together in a loop of preference that empowers us.

Is the power preference sufficient to ensure autonomy? It frees preference of external semantic constraints because of the self-referential feature of it. In this way it is like the claim, "All true sentences are true," which says of other true sentences that they are true and, at the same time, if it is true, says of itself that it is true. In a similar way the power preferences—my preference to have the preference structure that I do have pertaining to action *A*—is a preference for all the other preferences that I have pertaining to the action and, at the same time, it is a preference for having the power preference itself. The semantic ungroundedness

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discussed by Saul Kripke[14] might be considered a semantic defect, but, as Vann McGee[15] has shown, the ungroundedness of a sentence does not mean that it lacks a truth value. Rather, the ungroundedness means that the truth value is a matter of choice. Consider again the sentence, "All true sentences are true." This sentence, if true, says of itself, as well as other sentences, something that might be expressed by the sentence, "This sentence is true." The truth of this latter sentence, if it is true, is not grounded in any antecedently specified truth conditions. Let us say, therefore, that this latter sentence is "ungrounded." We can choose to assign it a truth value: for example, we can choose to assign it the value "true," but this choice will not be grounded in any antecedently specified truth conditions. So the ungroundedness of the power preference does not mean that there is no truth value to the claim that such a power preference exists, but only that the truth value depends on choice. The ungroundedness provides a kind of semantic independence, therefore, which is a virtue of the power preference as a condition of autonomy. We want the autonomy of our preference to depend on our preference itself, and preference is the dispositional surrogate of choice.

The internal structure and, indeed, the semantic structure of the power preference reveals its merit for the role of explicating autonomy. However, this does not mean that the power preference is a sufficient condition for autonomous preference. There are two reasons for this. The first concerns the possibility of external manipulation. The second concerns the possibility of internal compulsion. Consideration of both will take us back to the paradox of reason with which we began. Consider the possibility of external manipulation. A power preference, though semantically ungrounded, may result from choice, and choice may be externally controlled. Another person might direct my thoughts and preferences. We can imagine a braino installed in my brain, as we did above, which is controlled by another person who operates the braino to cause me to form my preferences, including a preference for having the preference structure that I have. The braino might be used to cause my power preference. Without electronic control of my brain, another person might make use of psychological compulsion. If another person knows that a certain line of reasoning, perhaps one that appeals to religious authority, will make me choose to prefer a course of action and to prefer to have a preference structure pertaining to this course of action, then I am subject to manipulation by the other person in my choice of a power preference by a line of reasoning that appeals to religious authority.

It is clear that such causation of the power preference deprives me of autonomy, however satisfied I might be with the power preference. My

[14] Saul Kripke, "Outline of a Theory of Truth," *Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 19, Seventy-Second Annual Meeting, American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division (Nov. 6, 1975): 690–716.

[15] Vann McGee, *Truth, Vagueness, and Paradox* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1991).

preference for the preference structure that I have, including this preference itself, might be controlled by another person. Should we conclude from this that a power preference must be uncaused, as libertarians might propose, to ensure that the preference is autonomous? This proposal might appear promising as a solution to the problem, until we remember that we need some positive account of how a person can be the cause of his or her preferences. The mere fact that a preference of mine is uncaused, even a power preference, does not ensure that the preference is up to me or that I am the cause of it. In short, the denial of causal etiology of a power preference leaves us without a positive account of a relationship of an agent to a preference to ensure that it is autonomous. Are we caught in a dilemma then? Must we say that if my preference, even a power preference, is caused, then it is not free because it is caused, and if it is uncaused, then here, too, it is not free because I am not the cause of my preference? Is there any explanation of how I can be the cause of a preference, including my power preference, which precludes control of my preferences by another or by some compulsion?

V. The Primacy Condition

The answer to this question and the solution to the dilemma is contained in the formulation of the problem. What we must require is that the power preference be a preference that a person has because he or she prefers to have that preference. Moreover, we need to require that the person has the power preference that he or she has because he or she prefers to have it in a rather special way. Most simply put, the preference for having the power preference must be the primary explanation for why he or she has the power preference. Thus, to obtain an account of autonomy that satisfies the appropriate external as well as internal conditions on autonomy, we must require that a preference for the power preference on the part of the agent, which is internal to the power preference, as we have noted, is the primary explanation of the existence of the power preference. There may be many components to a complete explanation of a preference, but for the preference to be autonomous, the preference for the power preference must be the primary explanation of the preference itself. This condition will be called *the primacy condition*.

Let us recall that a power preference is a preference for having the preferences that one has pertaining to some specific action *A*. Thus, on an account of autonomy in terms of the power preference and satisfaction of the primacy condition, a person might be autonomous with respect to some actions but not others. A bolder theory of autonomy might hold that we are autonomous with respect to all of our preferences concerning all of our preferred actions. The result of such a theory would resemble in this respect a Sartrian theory of freedom affirming that all of our choices

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are both free and uncaused.[16] However, the psychology of preference appears to allow for failure of autonomy of preference resulting from the power of desire if, for example, the strength of a desire overpowers the activity of metamental evaluation in the formation of preference. Many libertarians, Reid for one,[17] have conceded that, though the will is sometimes free, it is at other times overwhelmed by desire or passion. This appears to me to be the truth of the matter. What is of paramount importance, however, is the looping structure of the power preference satisfying the primacy condition. A power preference is a preference for the preferences that one has concerning doing *A*, writing this paper, for example. The power preference itself concerns *A*, writing this paper, and is, therefore, a preference for itself as well as for other preferences in the preference structure. When one has this power preference because one prefers to have it, and in a way that satisfies the primacy condition, the preference is autonomous.

VI. Agent Causality Explained

Let us note the advantages of this account and then return to the paradox of reason. First of all, a power preference that satisfies the primacy condition offers us an explanation of agent causality. Such a preference is one that I have because I am the cause of the preference. If I have a preference because I prefer to have it, then I and not someone else am the cause of the preference. Consider again the case of the braino. In that case, the operator of the braino, not I, is the cause of my preferences, even my power preferences. In such a case, I do not have a preference because I prefer to have it. I have it because the braino operator prefers that I have it. I have the preferences that I do because he operates the machine rather than because I prefer to have them. When he causes me to have a preference for a course of action and to prefer to have the preference structure that I have pertaining to the action, the latter is a power preference. There is a failure of autonomy here because the primacy condition is not satisfied. The primary explanation of why I have the power preference is that he causes it, not that I do. Alternatively, if the primacy condition is satisfied, and I have the power preference because I prefer to have it, then the preference cannot be controlled by the operator of the braino. (If it were, then I would not have the preference because I preferred to have it.) When the primacy condition is satisfied, I am the cause of the power preference in that I have that preference because I prefer to have it.

This account of agent causality avoids the regress and "surd." There is no regress because the power preference loops back onto itself and is a

[16] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

[17] Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Essay 4.

preference for itself as well as for other preferences pertaining to the action *A*. There is no "surd," because there is no appeal to a self causing a preference in some unexplained or mysterious way. On the contrary, the explanation for the preference is a preference, and causation of preferences by preferences is not mysterious. The looping character of the preference might seem to introduce something odd if not mysterious. Isn't the idea of a preference existing because it is a preference for itself a mysterious one? The answer, which will be elaborated upon further when we consider the solution to the paradox of reason, is that components in a structure can be mutually supporting in ordinary causal terms. Consider a structure built of three flat boards leaning against the sides of a small triangle-shaped board placed at the top. If you remove the triangle, the structure will collapse. Each of the components contributes causally to the support of the structure, and the triangle at the top plays the role of supporting the three boards leaning against its sides. The triangle contributes causally to holding itself in place in the structure as it contributes causally to holding the boards in place. It is a kind of keystone in the structure. This kind of mutual causal support is commonplace and not mysterious. My claim is that the structure of preferences causally resembles this physical structure. The power preference playing the role of the triangle may be causally supported by the other preferences in the structure at the same time that it causally supports the structure and, indirectly, the position of itself within the structure.

VII. Causality and the Power Preference

The metaphor of a structure containing three boards and a triangle calls to our attention the need for considering the position of the power preference in satisfying the primacy condition in the "structure" of causes. First of all, consider the causal influence of the preferences of another agent. We appear to obtain a paradoxical result if we concede, as we must, that we sometimes have the preferences that we do because of the preferences of others. For surely we can autonomously prefer to satisfy the preferences of another. But how can I have the preferences that I do pertaining to an action because I prefer to have them if I have the preferences that I do because of the preferences that you have? This paradox concerning the preferences of others leads naturally to the internal paradox of reason. For how can I have the preferences that I do pertaining to an action because I prefer to have them if I have the preferences that I do because of the *reasons* that I have for these preferences?

Let us consider the paradox concerning the preferences of others. The solution to it rests on drawing a distinction between different ways in which I can be influenced by the preferences of another person. At one extreme, there is the control of my preferences in some concealed way by another so that I do not even perceive that I am controlled at all. A bit less

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extreme is the case in which I prefer what I do because of my knowledge of the preferences of another person whom I have a compulsive desire or impulse to satisfy. Extreme cases of obsession with another person, whether as the result of my love or the other's charismatic power, may have the result that I cannot help preferring what I perceive the other to prefer. It is not just that I desire to do what the other prefers. It is rather that the other has an influence over me of such a systematic sort that it extends beyond my first-order desire to higher-level evaluation and preference. Obsessive love or charismatic power may have this feature. In these states, my mind and metamind are taken over by the other, so that whatever the other values, I value, and whatever the other prefers, I prefer. There is no autonomy here, for I prefer what I do not because I prefer to have that preference, but because of the influence of the other.

Can I autonomously prefer what the other prefers? I can. If I prefer to satisfy the preferences of the other because I prefer to have such preferences, then I am autonomous. On the contrary, if I prefer to satisfy the preferences of the other but I do not have that preference because I prefer to have it, I may be enslaved to the other. In short, whether I am autonomous depends on whether the preference that I have for satisfying the preferences of the other results from a power preference which satisfies the primacy condition. If I have the power preference because I prefer to have it, then I am autonomous. If not, I may be in bondage to the powers of the other. It does not matter for my autonomy whether I prefer to satisfy the preferences of the other or not. What matters is why I have that preference. To be autonomous, I must have the preference because I prefer to have it.

VIII. The Paradox of Reason Solved

These reflections on the paradox concerning the preferences of others lead to the solution of the paradox of reason. How can I have the preferences that I do because I prefer to have them if I have these preferences because of the reasons that I have for having them? The answer is more complicated than the explanation of how we can autonomously prefer to satisfy the preferences of another person, but the fundamental idea is the same. I can be enslaved by reasons just as I can be enslaved by the preferences of another, but preferring something because of the reasons that I have for preferring it, like preferring something because of the preferences of another, need not be bondage. If the response to reasons like the response to the preferences of another has a primary explanation in my power preferences, then the response may be autonomous in spite of the causal influences. Another person could have such amorous or charismatic power over me as to supply me with reasons that become my reasons for forming a preference because of his or her power over me. If I cannot resist the other person, then my preference, though it is one for

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which I have reasons, is not autonomous. It does not matter whether the reasons are good reasons or bad ones. If I respond to them because of the power of the other, if the power of the other is the primary explanation of why I form my preference in accord with these reasons, then my preference is not autonomous.

I may, however, form a preference in accord with reasons in a way that is compatible with autonomy. The way should now be clear. If I form a preference in accord with reasons because I prefer to form my preference in accord with these reasons and this preference accords with a power preference for the preference satisfying the primacy condition, then I am autonomous in preferring what I do for the reasons that I have. I can autonomously prefer to form preferences in accord with reasons, and when I do form preferences in accord with such reasons, I autonomously prefer what I do for these reasons. The basic solution to the paradox of reason is that I autonomously prefer to form preferences in accord with reasons.

It might seem that this solution to the paradox of reason only calls up another paradox, however. For now it seems that I can only form autonomous preferences in accord with reasons if I first have an autonomous preference for proceeding in this way. This naturally raises the question of whether these autonomous preferences for forming preferences in accord with reasons may themselves be formed in accord with reasons. It appears, therefore, that we might be forced to concede that some autonomous preferences cannot be formed in accord with reasons, namely, the autonomous preference to form preferences in accord with reasons. As Sartre suggests concerning some choices, it appears that some autonomous preferences must be without justification and without excuse.[18] We might put the issue as a dilemma: Either some autonomous preferences must be formed without reasons, namely, autonomous preferences for forming preferences in accord with reasons, or some preferences must be formed in accord with reasons without an autonomous preference for forming them in that way. On either alternative, not all autonomous preferences can be formed in accord with reasons.

The dilemma is a false one, however. A preference can be formed in accord with reasons at the same time that a preference is formed to be guided by reasons in forming preferences. Consider a difficult choice. Someone is trying to decide whether to change her career in a major way. As she remarks on the difficulty of the choice, we advise her that, since she is a philosopher, all she needs to do is tally up her reasons and decide. She may justly reply that we do not understand the seriousness of the matter, for she has to decide which reasons are to guide her decision. Put another way, though it may be important for her to reflect on the reasons

[18] I was not able to link this interpretation to a specific passage, for his prose has a charmingly diffuse character, but I am indebted to Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

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that she has, she must evaluate them and decide which ones she prefers to guide her decision. In fact, the choice of what career she will prefer and the choice of what reasons will determine her preference may well occur together. When she has a preference for forming her career preference in accord with some reasons and not others, she may, at the same time, form her preference in accord with those reasons. In fact, the decision to prefer one career over another and the decision to form her preferences in accord with some reasons over others may coincide functionally as well as temporally. Her preference to pursue a career that she finds personally rewarding may be functionally equivalent to preferring to form her preference concerning her career for the reason that she finds the career personally rewarding. Which comes first, the career preference, or the preference to be guided by the reasons that support this career preference? This question is answered by denying that one has to come before the other. The career preference and the preference to be guided by reasons that support this career preference may occur at the same time.

A critic may persist and claim that even if they occur at the same time, one must be the cause or explanation of the other and, therefore, have causal or explanatory precedence or dominance over the other. The reply is that the career preference and the preference to form such preferences by reasons may be mutually supportive in the way that two cards leaning against each other are mutually supportive or, to take my favorite metaphor, in the way that stones in an arch support the keystone as it supports them, so that the structure remains standing because of a loop of mutual support. Suppose, too, that the critic of my theory is moved to protest that even if the career preference and the preference to be guided by reasons that support the career preference are simultaneous and mutually supportive, there is a problem about the autonomy of the preference to be guided by reasons that support the career preference. What would make this preference autonomous? The answer, of course, is that the preference must be a preference that the person has because she prefers the preference structure concerning that preference; that is, there is a power preference satisfying the primacy condition for that preference. It is, therefore, autonomous.

Can the formation of preference for some special reason, because it satisfies the categorical imperative, for example, suffice for autonomy without the satisfaction of the primacy condition? To test this idea, consider a philosopher, similar to Kant, who forms a preference to tell the truth and not to lie, for the reason that it satisfies the categorical imperative. Is this sufficient for the person to be autonomous in choosing to tell the truth? Suppose that a person, Catecomp, forms his preferences for the reason that they satisfy the categorical imperative, but Catecomp is a victim of a braino implanted in his brain, which allows the operator, Controller, to determine what reasons will move Catecomp to form his preferences. Controller chooses to make Catecomp be guided by the cat-

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egorical imperative in his formation of preferences. Catecomp is not autonomous, no matter how perfectly he is guided by the categorical imperative, because he is controlled by another person in how he forms his preferences. The problem for Catecomp is not that he fails to form his preferences on the basis of the categorical imperative, but that his formation of preferences on the basis of the categorical imperative, even if he prefers to form preferences in this way, is the result of the intervention of Controller. Catecomp does not form preferences because he prefers to form preferences on the basis of the categorical imperative, but because Controller makes him form his preferences in this way. Notice that even if Controller creates a preference in Catecomp for forming preferences in a way that satisfies the categorical imperative, Catecomp will not have this preference because he prefers to have it. In short, he will lack a power preference satisfying the primacy condition for a preference for forming his preferences in the way that he does. Autonomy supplements rationality rather than being a consequence of it.

IX. Reason and Autonomy: The Ultrapreference

A host of talented contemporary authors, John Martin Fischer[19] and J. David Velleman,[20] for example, have tried to reduce freedom or autonomy to the influence and governance of reasons in preference and choice. But any such account will fall short unless it somehow guarantees that a person is autonomous in the way in which the person is influenced by or governed by reasons. The influence and governance by reasons, no matter how admirably rational, can be controlled by another person. The result is that the controlled individual lacks freedom and autonomy. We must add autonomy to any account of being influenced or governed by reasons, rather than expect that autonomy should be a consequence of such influence or governance. The preference to be guided or governed by a system of reasons, *SR*, in forming a preference, *P*, must be autonomous in order for the preference *P*, guided by reasons, to be autonomous. Does this preference to be so guided or governed lead us to a regress of preferences?

It does not. Call the preference to be guided or governed by a system of reasons an *ultrapreference*. Now suppose that there is a power preference satisfying the primacy condition for the ultrapreference. This power preference may have the features of any other preference. It may be a preference in a preference structure, and the person may prefer to have this structure because the person prefers to have it. In short, there may be a power preference for the preference structure containing the ultrapref-

[19] John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control*, Aristotelian Society Series, vol. 14 (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

[20] J. David Velleman, "What Happens When Someone Acts?" *Mind* 101, no. 403 (1992): 461–81.

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erence. The looping character of the power preference again avoids the regress and the "surd." Must the ultrapreference be a preference that a person forms, as Sartre suggests, without justification and without excuse? Not at all. The ultrapreference may be a preference that the person forms guided or governed by the system of reasons, *SR*. The ultrapreference is governed by the system of reasons, *SR*, at the same time that the ultrapreference is a preference to be governed by *SR*, and so there is a loop of preference back on to itself. This loop of preference, which may include the power preference in the governance by the system of reasons, *SR*, is the loop of autonomy that ties autonomy and rationality together.

X. A Summary on Preferences, Reason, and Autonomy

Let us retrace our path and end with a consideration of the perennial problem of freedom and determinism, reinterpreted as the problem of autonomy and determinism. We began by asking how we might solve the paradox of reason, that is, if we are governed by reasons in our preferences, then we are in bondage to reason and not autonomous; whereas if we are not governed by reason, then we are not autonomous. We noted that the solution is that we may have an autonomous preference to be guided by reasons in forming our preferences. Moreover, this autonomous preference itself may be guided by the reasons that we prefer to be guided by. This becomes possible once one notes that autonomous preference results from a power preference for one's preference structure. This power preference is itself a preference in the preference structure and, therefore, loops back onto itself. The result is that the autonomous preference is a volition of which I am the cause, in the sense that I have the preference because I prefer to have it. No regress results from this account of autonomy. Finally, we are not left with some "surd" of an unexplained or unjustified preference. The preference is explained by the fact that I have it because I prefer to have it and for the reasons that I prefer to have govern my preferences.

XI. Conclusion: Arational Autonomy, Causation, and Determinism

We are left with two perennial problems that we are now in a position to answer. The first concerns whether we must be governed by reasons in order to be autonomous. The view of autonomy advanced in this essay is compatible with arationalism. Suppose that a person prefers at time *t* not to be guided by reasons in the future. He may even have reasons for this at time *t*. Moreover, his preference for not being guided by reasons in the future may be autonomous. Consider any time later than *t*. At such a time, the person may autonomously prefer what he does without being guided by reasons at that time. He might not even be guided by the

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reasons that he had at *t* for preferring not to be guided by reasons in the future. The future that was referred to at *t* is now present, and he might not be guided by any reasons, including the earlier ones, in his present preferences. His present preferences may, nonetheless, be preferences in a preference structure that he has because he prefers to have it. He has become arationally autonomous. Rationality is compatible with autonomy, but autonomy supplements rationality.

The second problem is whether the account of autonomy that I have proposed is compatible with causal determinism. The answer will, of course, depend on how one defines determinism. The simplest answer is that autonomous preference is compatible with the preference being causally explained. Moreover, the conditions of causal explanation may extend in a sequence as far back in time as one cares to imagine. All that is required for autonomy is that the primary explanation for the power preference be that the person has the preference because he or she prefers to have it. There might be some secondary explanation, and further explanation beyond that, and so forth back into the indefinite past. One might object that remote explanations, no matter how secondary, are causal conditions over which the person had no control. The answer is that there are always causal conditions of our preferences over which we had no control, for example, our being born. If it is asked whether we could have preferred otherwise, we may answer briefly that we could have, provided that we were autonomous in our power preference and would have been autonomous in our power preference had we preferred otherwise. Once again, this is compatible with a causal explanation of preference that extends in a secondary way as far back into the past as one cares to imagine. The burden of compatibilism is to explain the difference between causation that makes us free in our preferences and causation that puts us in bondage so that, understanding this difference, we do not fear the forces of nature but, instead, find our autonomy within the natural universe. We have found it. When we prefer to have the preference structure that we do pertaining to our preferences because we prefer to have them, we find a place for our autonomy in the natural order of things free of bondage. Autonomous preference and the actions that result from it provide us with the dignity of being causal agents in the causal order. Autonomy provides us a place of liberty in the natural world of cause and effect.

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