NATURAL AUTONOMY AND ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

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AUTONOMY requires open choices, alternative possibilities, viable options. Or so it seems. However, attempts to give a systematic account of such open-choices-autonomy have encountered notorious difficulties. Libertarian theories became enmeshed in the inscrutable mysteries of libertarian contra-causal agency, and the compatibilist interpretations of "could have done otherwise" have a strong scent of ad hoc desperation. Empiricist philosophers have now turned away from autonomy-as-alternatives in favor of autonomy-as-authenticity. The most dramatic example is offered by Harry Frankfurt: the willing addict cannot do otherwise, has no alternatives, but — Frankfurt insists — is nonetheless free and fully autonomous, because he decisively favors such addiction. Thus open alternatives are not required for autonomy, and autonomy-as-authenticity supplants autonomy-as-alternatives.

Frankfurt's willing addict is designed to drive a stake through the heart of autonomy-as-alternatives: the willing addict has no options, but is still autonomous. And indeed the addict is doing as he wishes, and even wills as he wishes; but he is certainly not autonomous. This poor devil whose hopes and possibilities and alternatives have constricted into a single-minded desire for drugs is at best a happy slave, with no thought or hope of escape. Why should anyone regard him as autonomous; but no one should imagine that he is autonomous.

Problems with the self's authentic wishes make it tempting to reinforce authenticity with Reason. Thus Susan Wolf argues that an agent really wants the ability "to 'track' the True and Good in her value judgments" (p. 75); thus the "freedom" to choose some other alternative is a pseudofreedom that "no one could ever have reason to want to exercise" (p.55). Alternative possibilities become unnecessary, even undesirable.

Notwithstanding Wolf's spirited defense of rational single-path authenticity, there is something disquieting about having no alternative to the single true path dictated by Reason. The concern was voiced by Dostoyevsky's underground man:

So one's own free, unrestrained choice, one's own whim, be it the wildest, one's own fancy, sometimes worked up to a frenzy — that is the most advantageous advantage that cannot be fitted into any table or scale and that causes every system and every theory to crumble into dust on contact. And where did these sages pick up the notion that man must have something that they feel is a normal and virtuous set of wishes; what makes them think that man's will must be reasonable and in accordance with his own interests? All man actually needs is independent will, at all costs and whatever the consequences. (Dostoyevsky, 1864/1910, p. 110)

One need not share Dostoyevsky's frenzy to share his visceral sense of loss at Reason's denial of alternative possibilities. The goal of this paper is to show that there are powerful causes and sufficient reasons for fearing the loss of open alternatives. Compatibilists are...
fully justified in rejecting mysterious libertarian versions of autonomy-as-alternatives; but when compatibilists (like Frankfurt and Wolf) abandon alternatives in favor of authenticity, they throw out the baby with the bath water.

The central claim of this paper is that alternative possibilities are essential to autonomy, and the central project is to develop an empirically plausible account of autonomy-as-alternatives: an account based on the vital importance of alternative possibilities in the natural world, rather than on mysterious libertarian agency. The first step in accomplishing that project: alternative possibilities must be rescued from the libertarians, brought down to Earth, and thoroughly naturalized. A good place to start the naturalization process is on a foraging expedition with a white-footed mouse.

II. AUTONOMY NATURALIZED

While studying the behavior of feral white-footed mice that had learned to run through mazes for rewards, J. Lee Kavanau noted that well-educated mice—quite familiar with the correct path to food—occasionally still take an incorrect path:

Investigators sometimes are puzzled by the fact that once an animal has learned a discrimination well, it nonetheless still makes some “incorrect” responses. Actually, these responses are incorrect only from the point of view of the investigator’s rigidly prescribed program, not from that of the animal. The basis for these responses is that the animal has a certain degree of variability built into many of its behavior patterns. This variability is adaptive to conditions in the wild, where there are many relationships that are not strictly prescribed. (1967, p. 1628)

Thus if the white-footed mouse never strayed from the one true path, it would be unlikely to discover the benefits that might subsequently appear along other routes and would be ill-equipped to respond rapidly should its most beneficial route be closed off or run dry. By occasionally taking alternative paths, the white-footed mouse keeps its options open. As Kavanau summarizes the benefits:

The habit of deviating fairly frequently from stereotyped “correct” responses, together with a high level of spontaneous activity, underlie the remarkable facility with which white-footed mice can be taught to cope with complex contingencies. (1967, p. 1628)

The spontaneous white-footed mouse is not the paradigm of autonomy; nonetheless, it can teach us some important autonomy lessons. Our success—in gaining knowledge, pursuing science, working out problems—is deeply rooted in the pattern that also guides the foraging of the white-footed mouse. We pursue a path because it is particularly successful, but we do not stop exploring new ones. When the successful behavioral pattern loses its effectiveness we have other alternatives ready. In like manner, we do not entirely abandon the previously successful pattern, and may return to it occasionally (though we know it is unlikely to work). If later the old behavioral pattern again proves beneficial, we are less likely to overlook those benefits.

The same pattern of maintaining alternatives can be observed in behavior (of pigeons, mice, and humans) shaped on a variable interval reinforcement schedule (the schedule that shapes most of our learned behavior). Behavior shaped on a variable interval schedule can be maintained with quite limited positive reinforcement; and when the pattern is almost extinguished, one instance of positive reinforcement revives it to near full strength. That is not invariably a good thing: it causes my deleterious gambling behavior—almost ended by a long losing streak—to regain full intensity following one small payoff. But the overall advantage of having a large range of behavior readily available for changing environments and new contingencies more than balances the disadvantages—for white-footed mice as well as humans.

Thus autonomy-as-alternatives is grounded in learning strategies that are not the exclusive province of higher-level rational powers, nor the exclusive property of humans. Autonomy involves access to genuine alternatives, and in that sense human autonomy parallels white-footed mouse autonomy. Human intelligence generates important
differences between the autonomy of white-footed mice and the autonomy of humans; but even those differences are best understood in terms of their common roots in the exploration of alternative paths. The white-footed mouse explores alternative paths with keen scent and sharp eyes and swift feet. Our reflective analytic intelligence is our best exploratory device, and without it we are as ill-equipped for examining a variety of paths and behavioral patterns as would be a white-footed mouse deprived of scent and sight. So reason is essential to full human autonomy: reason opens a wide range of possibilities and options, and facilitates careful assessment of those options. But it is not a Reason that closes off alternatives in favor of a single true or authentic path. It is precisely the opposite.

This use of reason to discover and explore and maintain open alternatives stands in stark contrast to the more traditional use of Reason to discover the single true path. The former plants reason firmly in the natural world, as a natural extension of animal intelligence; the latter makes Reason a special faculty for discovery of final immutable truths. The former keeps options open for use in a changing world; the latter locks onto a single unwavering true path, from which any deviation is either unfortunate error or shallow impetuosity. Susan Wolf develops the most impressive contemporary account of single-path-Reason; and on her view, it does seem absurd to wish for the possibility of deviating from Reason: it would be like judging a train better because it can occasionally jump the tracks. But this Reason perspective is too short. If the focus is exclusively on the most immediately desirable path, the option of pursuing a less desirable alternative seems at best a bothersome distraction and at worst a perilous and irrational mistake: certainly not an enriching freedom. As Wolf disparages autonomy-as-alternatives:

To want autonomy, then, is not only to want the ability to make choices even when there is no basis for choice but to want the ability to make choices on no basis even when a basis exists. But the latter ability would seem to be an ability no one could ever have reason to want to exercise. Why would one want the ability to pass up the apple when to do so would merely be unpleasant or arbitrary? (1990, p. 55)

From the perspective of natural autonomy-as-alternatives, one might want to pass up the apple—the most desirable and reasonable option, on this particular occasion—in order to discover new sources of fruit for when the apple harvest is exhausted. This longer perspective emphasizes pursuing the optimum pattern of results in a changing world fraught with uncertainty, and shows the importance of not being bound to the single path that seems currently most promising.4

III. AUTONOMY IN THE NATURAL WORLD

Natural intelligent autonomy—autonomy as alternatives—is our best strategy for rich and successful survival; and it reconciles spontaneous exploration with intelligent reflection, while avoiding libertarian mysteries and authenticity muddles. But can such open possibilities, such autonomy, exist in a natural (or a determined) world?

The natural—even determined—world is exactly the place for autonomy. Our "survival strategy" has shaped us, like our mammalian relative the white-footed mouse, to keep our options open. We might have evolved like the insects, with rigidly programmed behavioral patterns. Our evolutionary process took a different tack: we are individually “programmed” to favor a variety of paths, and to keep open a variety of such possibilities even when one path is the most immediately beneficial. This inclination is shared by many other species, it is explicable in natural terms, and its development and functioning no more require mysterious libertarian nonnatural creativity than does the evolution of the hand.

In contrast to natural autonomy-as-alternatives, the libertarian notion of autonomy-as-alternatives was designed to do heavier work than simply keeping options open: the mysteries of libertarian contra-causal free will must bear the burdens of moral responsibility. And that burden indeed may require nonnatural contra-causal autonomy. As described by C. A. Campbell, a champion of
such autonomy, the libertarian choice between the paths of moral effort and moral lethargy is "something for which a man is responsible without qualification, something that is not affected by heredity and environment but depends solely upon the self itself" (Campbell, 1957, p. 169). Since naturalism cannot support such unqualified choices, compatibilists proposed a "hypothetical" account of "could have acted/chosen otherwise," which Campbell describes thus:

... All that we really require to be assured of, in order to justify our holding X morally responsible for an act, is, we are told [by compatibilists], that X could have acted otherwise if he had chosen otherwise (Moore, Stevenson); or perhaps that X could have acted otherwise... if he had been placed in different circumstances. (Campbell, 1957, p. 161)

Campbell cogently argues that such hypothetical interpretations of "could have acted otherwise" cannot carry the weight of moral responsibility. But if we bid good riddance to moral responsibility, and leave it with libertarian free will—and with the angels and miracles and mysteries in the only environment in which moral responsibility can survive—then the hypothetical interpretation of "could have acted otherwise" provides precisely what we want.

Campbell (and Richard Taylor and Roderick Chisholm) require alternatives that cannot be explained naturalistically, choices that are inexplicable beyond appeal to my own ultimate creative self-willed powers: the decisive choice must be mine (not ultimately the product of my environment) if I am to have the credit or blame, the moral responsibility. But this libertarian picture of alternative choices—choices exercised independently of the environment—corrupts what is valuable in alternative possibilities. As natural products of a natural environment, we want alternatives shaped by their long-term or short-term usefulness in the environment in which we live, alternatives available for selection in response to our changing environment. The sterile insulated libertarian alternatives required by moral responsibility are not attuned to the environmental contingencies to which we must respond. That we are (or are not) open to exploring alternatives, our degree of effective intelligence, and the particular choice we make on any specific occasion all result from the environmental contingencies that have shaped us individually and as a species. Such contingencies undermine moral responsibility, which must be isolated from the natural environment, but they enhance natural autonomy-as-alternatives.

When pursuit of alternatives is recognized as an effective natural strategy—for mice as well as humans—then the compatibilist "hypothetical" account of alternatives becomes much more substantial and defensible. We do not want freedom for choices with no causal antecedents, freedom from all environmental contingencies, freedom to make inexplicable choices. To the contrary, what we want is what Campbell disparages: to be able to act otherwise if we choose otherwise, to act otherwise if we experience different circumstances. The white-footed mouse chooses to follow path A, and does so; but it wants to be able to follow paths B and C and D also, when it chooses: it wants to keep those options open. The choice made is no doubt the result of very complex environmental contingencies, including the long-term contingencies that shaped the species to occasionally explore different paths. It nonetheless meets the white-footed mouse autonomy requirements: not choices independent of all natural influences, but instead open alternatives that can be followed under changing environmental contingencies and "different circumstances." In like manner, natural human autonomy does not require causally inexplicable miraculous choosing. What we require is the opportunity to take a different path in different circumstances, the capacity to intelligently consider and pursue other open possibilities when a changing world makes an old path less rewarding. In order to keep such possibilities open, we must occasionally make specific path choices that are not immediately optimum. Perhaps that is what gives mysterious libertarian choice its enduring appeal. But there is nothing mysterious about the alternative choices required by natural autonomy. They optimize alternative possibilities, which is impor-
tant for successful living in our changing nat-
ural world. Thus when examined from a
wider perspective—a perspective encom-
passing the pattern of alternative-preserving
choices—any residual mystery disappears,
and autonomy-as-alternatives flourishes in
the natural environment.

IV. Autonomy Without Authenticity

A clearer understanding of natural auton-
omy-as-alternatives distinguishes it from
libertarian accounts of contra-causal alter-
natives; it also opens a better perspective on
what has been left out of contemporary com-
patibilist accounts of autonomy-as-authen-
ticity. Contrary to Frankfurt, concern over
the loss of alternative possibilities is well-
placed. Consider Frankfurt's famous exam-
ple (1969, pp. 835-836) of the villain, Black,
who wants Jones to perform a certain action.
Jones imagines he can perform that action,
or not, as he wishes; but Jones is mistaken,
for Black is closely monitoring Jones, and
should Jones choose some action other than
the one Black wishes, Black would manipu-
late Jones' brain to compel Jones to perform
Black's bidding. So Jones really has no alter-
natives. Still, Jones performs the act of his
own volition, and Black intervenes not at all.
Surely, Frankfurt argues, the act is still Jones' 
act (even though he had no other possibili-
ties), and Jones is autonomous and morally
responsible.

Jones is not, however, autonomous; he
only imagines himself to be so. Indeed, his
loss of autonomy is exacerbated rather than
ameliorated by his ignorance of Black's
machinations. Not only are the alternative
paths blocked, but also his understanding of
them is distorted. Human autonomy is en-
hanced by intelligent reflective consider-
ation of alternatives (that intelligence is the
distinctive autonomy-enhancing power of
humans, analogous to the speed or sense of
smell of other animals); but intelligent re-
flection is not autonomy-enhancing if it op-
erates under deception. Thus when an
individual (such as Frankfurt's willing addict,
who cannot do otherwise) is deprived of al-
ternatives, but still acts as he genuinely wants
to act, he may be acting "authentically;" but
not autonomously. If he believes he has al-
ternatives and does not (because some trick-
ster has closed them off) then he is even
further from autonomy: he lacks altern-
natives, and lacks the knowledge that is the
human's best tool for discovering and ex-
ploring alternatives.

Natural human autonomy involves the use
of intelligent analysis and critical reflection
to explore and choose among alternatives. It
requires not only an environment that offers
options and opportunities, but also requires
the critical capacities to recognize and anal-
lyze those options. It is more efficient to
think about, study, and discuss a variety of
possible paths instead of physically trudging
down them. Reason broadens human alter-
natives and autonomy, just as foot speed en-
hances white mouse autonomy. Thus an
individual shackled by childhood guilt (or
jealousy or obsessions or false beliefs) suf-
fers severe autonomy impediments. The man
who chooses skiing because of an unrecog-
nized sibling jealousy (a jealousy that inhib-
its his ability to adequately consider
alternatives) suffers impairment of auton-
omy; but the natural autonomy-as-alternati-
tives account explains that without the
cumbersome explanatory machinery of hier-
archical authenticity. Our autonomy is lim-
ited when we are prevented—by early
childhood traumas or unresolved parental
conflicts or whatever—from intelligently ex-
ploring alternatives. And our autonomy is
limited when we lack the intelligence or en-
ergy or self-control techniques to effectively
pursue options in which we are interested (if
I want to write my dissertation but cannot
overcome my writer's block or lethargy or
comic book obsession, I suffer restricted op-
portunities and reduced autonomy). Ex-
plaining such autonomy limitations does not
require a true authentic self, revealed or con-
firmed by decisive higher-order willing.
Quite simply, human autonomy suffers from
impaired intelligence in the same way that
white-footed mouse autonomy suffers from
a sprained ankle.

This does not imply that we must keep all
our possible options open, and continue to
make occasional forays down every path. Al-
ternatives that consistently yield no benefits
will eventually be entirely avoided, as the behavior of following that path is finally extinguished; the research programme that sinks deeper into degeneration (Lakatos, 1978) is ultimately abandoned. The white-footed mouse that occasionally dashes headlong into a brick wall (to keep that behavioral option open, in case the bricks should one day dissolve and open the way to a white-footed mouse cornucopia) does not enlarge its autonomy. Autonomy does require genuine alternatives; but autonomy is enhanced by selective intelligent consideration of alternatives, rather than indiscriminate multiplication of alternative paths.

When autonomy is understood as intelligent exploration of alternatives, then appeals to such shadowy substances as the "authentic self" can be eliminated. Defining the authentic true self (without appeals to mysterious libertarian free will or God's purpose for our lives) is notoriously difficult. The natural autonomy model avoids such difficulties, and focuses attention on effective intelligent choice (as a natural—and naturally explicable—extension of the exploration of alternatives carried on by other animals). In that setting, quandaries about "authenticity" and "true selves" wither away: if I am making an intelligent and knowledgeable choice among a wide range of open alternative paths, it is hard to imagine how the addition of "authenticity" could contribute anything further to my autonomy.

Authenticity is different and distinct from autonomy, and stems from a different tradition. Autonomy is the good of a changing and evolving world, in which keeping our options open is a valuable survival tool in the face of exhausted resources, new opportunities, and changing conditions. Authenticity, in contrast, is the good of a permanent, non-contingent world: we are authentic when we are following the approved path and fulfilling the designed function of the God whose artifacts we are. That God—whether the God of Moses or of Aristotle—changes not, so keeping one's options open is not a virtue; to the contrary, perfect authenticity demands perfect obedience (to the eternal laws of God or the immutable laws of Reason).

Even among such naturalist advocates of authenticity as Frankfurt, authenticity works best when isolated from the contingencies of environmental causation. The truly authentic character makes a "decisive commitment" (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 16) to a single path or volition; and at that level, the contingent forces that shaped the commitment cannot be considered: it is decisively and finally and authentically my choice, no matter how it came about. Authenticity thus focuses attention on the end, the conclusive act of choosing. The authentic individual follows the true path, or makes the decisive resounding commitment, and there is little or no concern about how the true path or the decisive commitment was reached. Autonomy (natural autonomy-as-alternatives) instead focuses on the continuing process: the autonomous choice is the choice reached in a context in which there are open alternatives and the capacities to effectively explore and choose among them. In order to see genuine autonomy, one must avoid the easy myopic focus on the choice itself (no matter how resounding or beneficial or thoroughly self-approved that choice may be, no matter how willingly one "takes responsibility" for that choice); instead, look at the setting in which the choice was made: were there genuine alternatives available, and did the individual possess the means (the knowledge, the intelligence, the freedom from obsession or irrational fear) to effectively consider those alternatives. It is not the decisiveness of the choice that establishes autonomy; it is the richness of the choosing context.

V. AUTONOMY AS A LIMITED GOOD

Alternatives are important to both humans and white-footed mice; but autonomy (autonomy-as-alternatives) is not an unqualified absolute good. Were the world static, autonomy would be of little use. And even in our changing world, autonomy is not an unmixed good. Gerald Dworkin argues that "autonomy that insists upon substantive independence [as does autonomy-as-alternatives] is not one that has a claim to our respect as an ideal," because (in contrast to autonomy-as-authenticity) it "makes auton-
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Dworkin is correct that autonomy-as-alternatives may conflict with loyalty and commitment and love; but that does not invalidate such autonomy. Even if this were the best-of-all-possible worlds, it would not follow that there can never be conflicts between different goods. And in this less than optimum world, such conflicts seem not at all uncommon. In any case, it must be acknowledged that autonomy-as-alternatives can conflict with loyalty and love. If I am committed to the care and welfare of my children, I am limited: I cannot pursue the path of artistic abandon, free of all family constraints, on a tropical island. (And I occasionally experience that as a not insignificant compromise of my autonomy.)

Along similar lines, William Shakespeare writes:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds, . . .

And there is that quality to some degree in all commitments: commitment to a theory or research programme or scientific paradigm is not quite like commitments of love, but it does mean that one will give less attention to—and thus have less readily available—alternatives. As Thomas Kuhn has noted (1962, Chapter 6) commitment to a particular “paradigm” may cause one to overlook potentially important phenomena, and thus miss the alternatives and discoveries to which they might lead.

But while such commitments may compromise autonomy, that is not an overwhelming problem for autonomy-as-alternatives. In the first place (as noted before), the fact that autonomy-as-alternatives will not perfectly accommodate every possible good is not a refutation of the view. Second, there is no reason to think that autonomy must be the overarching highest good: compromising it for the joys and benefits of love and loyalty may be a very decent compromise. Third, while commitments may restrict autonomy, they may also open a range of alternatives otherwise unavailable: some social paths may require genuine commitment as the price of admission; and as Kuhn notes, commitment to carrying out the normal science research projects within a particular paradigm may be the only means of gaining certain kinds of detailed information and surprising opportunities. Commitments may open some alternatives, to partially compensate for the closing of others. And finally, commitments need not be blinding obsessions. While being, in Yeats’ phrase, “deaf and dumb and blind in love” might well close the way to intelligent reflection on other possibilities, there may be somewhat less debilitating commitments. And for all the power of Kuhn’s discussion of paradigm commitments, it does seem possible for some scientists to be aware of flaws and problems in their scientific views, and to consider and even switch to alternative paths.

Natural autonomy-as-alternatives may not encompass all possible goods; but by putting solid animal flesh on the bones of the emaciated compatibilist account of “could-have-done-otherwise,” naturalized autonomy gives substance and function to genuine alternatives, while avoiding the slide into libertarian mysterious choice.

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NOTES

1. Libertarians have typically treated autonomy-as-alternatives as a wonderful mystery: Richard Taylor states that “the conception of a thing’s being ‘within one’s power’ or ‘up to him’ seems to defy analysis or definition altogether” (1974, p. 57) and Roderick Chisholm asserts that “… we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we really act, is a prime mover unmoved” (1975, p. 395). Robert Kane (1985) is a noteworthy exception. His unique version of the libertarian rejection of determinism incorporates randomness but scrupulously avoids mystery, while attempting to preserve moral responsibility.

2. Gerald Dworkin finds that not at all obvious. To the contrary, Dworkin insists on the possibility of autonomous slaves, and would not agree that such a result reveals a fatal flaw in autonomy-as-authenticity:

   In my conception, the autonomous person can be a tyrant or a slave, a saint or sinner, a rugged individualist or a champion of fraternity, a leader or a follower. (1988, p. 29)

This might be interpreted as an autonomous slave autonomously choosing a life of slavery (or of soldierly regimentation, to take another of Dworkin’s provocative examples) from among several alternatives; but then having chosen slavery, the slave is no longer autonomous. One autonomously chooses to be a slave, but one is not an ongoing autonomous slave. But it is doubtful that Dworkin would accept this: for Dworkin, the slave who wants to be a slave really is an ongoing autonomous slave, even in the absence of other options or possibilities of escape.
3. Marvin Zuckerman (1983) notes interesting studies of similar phenomena:

Whether they “need” to or not, species other than human do show spontaneous variation in instrumental behavior (Glanzer, 1953; Tolman, 1925), prefer stimuli of some complexity to simpler stimuli (Sackett, 1972), and approach and investigate novel stimuli in spite of their initial fears of such stimuli (Suomi & Harlow, 1976). . .

4. Wolf has a possible answer: if keeping options open (by means of occasionally choosing a path other than the one Reason selects as optimum) is the best means of ultimately discovering the full range of truth, then genuine Reason must recommend such options as truly Reasonable. Thus “any attempt to offer reasons for wanting to act against Reason will only show that the sense of Reason under attack is not the sense intended” (1990, p. 56). But such a response reduces to: the true path of the True and Good may involve following alternative paths. That would indeed save the single-True-path-of-Reason model, but at the cost of making it vacuous. In sum, then, the Reason justification for single-path authenticity fails to either include or refute the strengths of autonomy-as-alternatives.


6. These are of course disputed questions; see Waller, 1990, for further discussion.

7. Donald Campbell (1974/1987) gives a superb account of how human intelligence, language, and social cooperation function as highly successful “vicarious locomotor devices:” as further enhancements of exploratory processes starting with blind bodily overt movement and ranging through more efficient visual search to highly efficient language-enhanced socially vicarious exploration.

8. This is one of Gerald Dworkin’s (1976, p. 25) many provocative examples.