

Free Will

An Explanation of Perspectives

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities states that a person can be held morally responsible for their actions only if they could have done otherwise. Read from another direction, it indicates that someone who was unable to do anything other than what they actually did is without moral responsibility. The implication is that human actions can fall into one of only two categories: either they are “free” and we are morally responsible, or they are “unfree” and we are *not* so. This implication is based on the unstated assumption that a person unable to act otherwise is always under coercion, i.e. that the forces which remove a person’s ability to do otherwise are the *same* forces that cause a person to act as they do. Because the framework of determinism requires that every person is bound to act in one way and unable to do otherwise, the Principle could theoretically be applied to absolve all human actions from moral responsibility in a determinist world.

Frankfurt disagrees with the underlying assumption. His argument shows that a person who satisfies the latter clause of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities – who is “unable to act otherwise” – does not necessarily satisfy the definition of a person who is coerced – who is “forced to do it.” Thus, the two are not the same thing, and the conclusion that a coerced person is not morally responsible – a statement with which Frankfurt agrees – does not lead to the conclusion that someone “unable to act otherwise” is also not morally responsible.

Frankfurt’s argument deals with a situation in which human decision and the forces of coercion lead to the same result, where the “man with the gun” wants his victim to do something that the victim *already* wants to do. Jones₄ is presented with a choice between A and B, and the coercive agent Black desires him to choose A. The key to Frankfurt’s case is that Black, though capable of bringing sufficient coercive force to bear on Jones₄ that he will be totally unable to act otherwise, wants as little trouble as possible, and will *only* unveil his threat if Jones decides to choose B. Frankfurt requests for the sake of argument that we believe Black is able to predict Jones₄’s decision with

total accuracy; if this is unpalatable, imagine instead that Jones₄ will announce his decision with time to spare, time in which Black can intervene to “change his mind.”

Because Black is present, behind the scenes with his irresistible force, there is no conceivable future in which Jones₄ will choose B. He is “unable to act otherwise,” satisfying the requirements of the Principle. However, if he in fact chooses A, *Black will never act*. Jones₄ will have made the decision entirely on his own, for his own reasons, and is thus unquestionably morally responsible.

At first blush, this may seem an extreme and unlikely example, but it in fact approximates the reality of a deterministic world quite closely. A determinist would state that you are always bound to do what you will do, that there is never more than a single path that you can possibly tread. Yet, at the same time, we *feel* an ability to choose, that seems at odds with determinism. Jones₄’s example shows that the two are not incompatible. In a sense, we are like Jones₄s who always choose A – perhaps we were never able to do otherwise, but *as far as we will ever know* we made the decision on our own and are thus morally responsible. Frankfurt argues that the inherent feeling of freedom is, in fact, true. The Principle as formulated by Frankfurt argues that a person is without moral responsibility for an action if the circumstances make it “impossible for him to avoid performing it.” But because one can be unknowingly limited to a single course of action without at the same time being forcibly impelled to take it, then one’s decision to in fact take that course is just as free as if the limitations did not exist, and, correspondingly, one’s decision is just as accountable.