

Philosophy 101

Frankfurt on Alternate Possibilities & Freedom

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Frankfurt on
Alternate
Possibilities &
Freedom

Review

Frankfurt on
Alternate
Possibilities

Free Will &
Determinism

Review

Freedom

Freedom of Will: [1] a capacity of an agent to [2] choose according to her preferences [3] from amongst a set of relevant alternatives such that [4] she is responsible for that choice or action

Kinds of Freedom

- Freedom from coercion (mental or physical)
- Freedom from manipulation

Incompatibilism

- An agent who is coerced or manipulated is (typically) not morally responsible for her actions
- Moral responsibility and coercion/manipulation are *'incompatible'*
 - Why?

Alternate Possibilities

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP): a person is morally responsible for what s/he has done only if s/he could have done otherwise (or chosen otherwise)

Alternate Possibilities

- What explains why an agent is not morally responsible in cases of coercion/manipulation?
 - Proposal: PAP is violated – The agent could not have done otherwise

Frankfurt on Alternate Possibilities

Coercion & PAP

When we excuse a person who has been coerced, we do not excuse him because he was unable to do otherwise. Even though a person is subject to a coercive force that precludes his performing any action but one, he may nonetheless bear full moral responsibility for performing that action. (Frankfurt, 834)

- Frankfurt denies that PAP is the relevant explanation of why in coercion (or manipulation) one is not morally responsible

The Case of Jones

Jones decides for reasons of his own to do something, then someone threatens him with a very harsh penalty (so harsh that any reasonable person would submit to the threat) unless he does precisely that, and Jones does it. Will we hold Jones morally responsible for what he has done? I think this will depend on the roles we think were played, in leading him to act, by his original decision and by the threat. (Frankfurt, 831)

Versions of the Case

- Jones₁: Always does what he decides to do; the threat plays no role
 - responsible for acting
- Jones₂: The threat totally overpowers Jones; he does what the threat says, no matter what he decided earlier
 - not responsible for acting
- Jones₃: Weighs decision and threat evenly, but ultimately acts on his original reasons rather than the threat
 - responsible for acting

Responsibility & PAP

- Claim: Jones₁₋₃ show that PAP plays no role in evaluation of moral responsibility
- Assignment of moral responsibility depends on evaluating *the reasons for which one acted*, not whether one could have done otherwise
 - Jones₁ and Jones₃ acted on the basis of bad motives, that is why they are responsible

Coercion with Responsibility?

- The Jones case counts as coercion only if Jones acts *because of* the threat
- Coercion requires that the coerced subject act *because of* the coercive force exerted on her
 - Only the case of Jones₂ is a case of genuine coercion

Objection

- Is the case of Jones₃ a clear counterexample to the claim that coercion/manipulation excuses?
 - The presence of the threat in the Jones₃ case does not meant that he *could not* have done otherwise

Objection

His knowledge that he stands to suffer an intolerably harsh penalty does not mean that Jones₃, strictly speaking, cannot perform any action but the one he does perform. After all it is still open to him, and this is crucial, to defy the threat if he wishes to do so and to accept the penalty his action would bring down upon him. In the sense in which the principle of alternate possibilities employs the concept of "could have done otherwise," Jones₃'s inability to resist the threat does not mean that he cannot do otherwise than perform the action he performs. Hence the case of Jones₃ does not constitute an instance contrary to the principle. (Frankfurt, 834)

Response – Jones₄

Suppose someone—Black, let us say—wants Jones₄ to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits until Jones₄ is about to make up his mind what to do, and he does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones₄ is going to decide to do something other than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones₄ is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones₄ decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do. Whatever Jones₄'s initial preferences and inclinations, then, Black will have his way. (Frankfurt, 835)

Response – Jones₄

suppose that Black never has to show his hand because Jones₄, for reasons of his own, decides to perform and does perform the very action Black wants him to perform. In that case, it seems clear, Jones₄ will bear precisely the same moral responsibility for what he does as he would have borne if Black had not been ready to take steps to ensure that he do it. (Frankfurt, 836)

Frankfurt's Conclusion

- The relevant explanation of why someone is responsible concerns the reasons for which they act, not whether they could have done otherwise
 - In cases of coercion or manipulation, one is not responsible because of the relationship one has to the reasons for which one acts

Free Will & Determinism

Determinism

Determinism: For any state of the subject, that subject's states are necessitated by the condition of its previous states plus the laws of nature.

Determinism

- The following are all compatible with determinism
 - choice
 - the causal efficacy of choice & effort
 - deliberation
 - unpredictability
- Is determinism compatible with free will?
 - Yes: 'Compatibilism'
 - No: 'Incompatibilism'
 - Incompatibilism says *why* determinism & freedom are incompatible, but not *whether* we are *in fact* free or determined

Alternative Possibilities & Incompatibilism

- Why might determinism & freedom be incompatible?
- Determinism deprives us of the *power or ability to do or choose otherwise*.

Leeway Incompatibilism: The truth of determinism is incompatible with an agent's having the capacity to do otherwise than as she did

Do We Have Free Will?

- What about the factual question of whether we have free will?
 - Yes: Libertarianism
 - No: Hard Incompatibilism

There is Free Will

Libertarianism: determinism is false and there is free will

There is No Free Will – Hard Incompatibilism

Hard Incompatibilism: There is no free will of the kind necessary
for moral responsibility and desert

Key Concepts

- Conception of Free Will
- Principle of Alternate Possibilities
- Determinism
- Compatibilism & Incompatibilism
 - Libertarianism
 - Hard Incompatibilism

Questions

- Is free will necessary for moral responsibility?
- Is free will compatible with determinism?
- Is moral responsibility compatible with determinism?