

In “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” Harry Frankfurt’s argument on the Principle of Alternate Possibilities is reconstructed into the following two premises and one conclusion:

P1. If a counterexample to the Principle of Alternate Possibilities exists, then the Principle of Alternate Possibilities is false.

P2. A counterexample is constructed such that a person could be morally responsible for what he has done even though he could not have done otherwise.

C. The Principle of Alternate Possibilities is false.

Premise 1 states that if one is able to find a counterexample to the argument of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities — “a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise” (830), then the argument fails and is rejected as a result. Those who believe in the Principle of Alternate Possibilities support the incompatibilism perspective of free will and determinism. Determinism means that one’s action is determined before the moment they act and would not be able to do some other action by the law of physics, which conflicts with the definition of free will. In other words, the Principle of Alternate Possibilities implies free will does not exist under determinism.

Frankfurt then, in premise 2, proposes a mechanism to construct a counterexample to the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, in which he focuses more on the branch discussing one’s moral obligation. According to the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, if people have free will, it means that they are morally responsible for the action only if they could have done some other action but choose to do this one. This conflicts with determinism, since people could not have done some other action by the law of physics. Frankfurt, however, argues that “a person could be morally responsible for what he has done even though he could not have done otherwise” (829). He constructs the counterexample as the following: suppose a person named Black wants another person named Jones to perform a certain action. Black would not intervene with Jones’ action unless it is clear to him (assuming Black can tell what Jones wants and does perfectly) that Jones is going to decide to do something other than what he wants him to do: “Black then would take

effective steps to ensure that Jones decides to do, and that he does do, what [Black] wants him to do” (835). Thus, the resulting action from Jones would be the same, regardless of Jones’ intention. This ensures “whatever Jones’s initial preferences and inclinations [are], Black will have his way” (835) to produce his favourable outcome.

This constructed circumstance provides a sufficient condition of which one could not have done something else otherwise than the action performed. Although the existence of Black seems to be an unavoidable force which ensures Jones completes the action – which might make Jones not morally responsible for the action since he is “threatened” and could not have done otherwise – Jones is in fact, responsible for the action. The option that Jones actually wants to perform the action and is certainly morally responsible for it is possible. In this scenario, he would be treated as he holds no moral responsibility under the Principle of Alternate Possibilities. This counterexample meets the requirements; Jones is morally responsible for the action and he could not have done something else that is not what Black is in favour of. The other case in which Jones does not want to do the action but has done it as a result of Black’s intervention, also bonds the moral responsibility to him.

Assuming all the premises, especially premise 2, are true, one is able to conclude that the Principle of Alternate Possibilities is false. This then becomes strong supporting evidence for the argument of compatibilism of free will and determinism. Frankfurt then proposes a revised version of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities – “a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise” (838). The revised version does not conflict with compatibilism of determinism and free will. People who support compatibilism then have a strong justification in hand.

One possible objection to Frankfurt’s argument is that the counterexample does not meet all of the requirements to reject the Principle of Alternate Possibilities. The counterexample considers the two possible cases in which Jones is responsible despite the fact that he intentionally or non-intentionally wants to do the action, since the results are always the same – Jones has done the action that Black is interested in, as Black uses effective means such as “giving [Jones] a portion or [putting] him under hypnosis” (835) to make sure he does it. Nevertheless, people can argue that if Jones were going to not do what is in Black’s interest, he would not be morally responsible for the action regardless of the same outcomes. It is true that deliberately or not, Jones has done it, but the causes of the same action are different. It is

reasonable enough to free Jones from any blame and moral responsibility if he has shown any signs of unwillingness to perform the action. To conclude, as long as Black intervenes to let Jones act the way he favors, Jones is not morally responsible for the action anymore.

This objection arises since there are various evaluation systems in determining whether one is morally responsible for an action or not. Some believe in discovering people's intentions. People who do not mean to do the action but ending up doing it, would not be morally responsible, which in this case, applies to Jones since he does not want to perform it. This supports the objection to Frankfurt's counterexample. On the other hand, others might focus on the results. After all, nobody else but Jones performs the action, by himself. He should take all of the consequences of the action and be responsible for it, disregarding whether he could not have done it otherwise. This supports Frankfurt's counterexample.

Both of the views coexist. The former view on determining one's moral responsibility seems to be friendlier and more favourable. However, the former view is not practical as criminals who commit crimes can claim they had good intentions for the sake of reducing penalties. One cannot tell other people's intentions perfectly, which is why the majority of people focus more on the results when judging one's moral responsibility for an action.

Another objection to Frankfurt's counterexample could be that either Jones performing the action or Black's choice of staying in the background or not is already determined by some earlier actions. Neither Jones or Black is morally responsible for the action and its results. There does exist some other external or internal factors which lead to this situation and the resulting action, and those factors should be the ones taking the moral responsibility. It is a chain reaction from whoever or whatever is responsible for the action. It could be someone else that makes them do the action.

Consider the following example involving Jones and Black: Jones is a university student who just finished his studying at the library. It is 9 pm already. He wants to get something cheap for dinner at a supermarket nearby. Black is the owner and only cashier of the supermarket at the time. He sees Jones head directly to the food area. There are only two types of sushi bento box left – one is salmon, the other is tuna – sitting inside the freezer. The two types of sushi box are from different restaurants, restaurant A and restaurant B, while both of them have the same price with a 30% discount. Black knows restaurant A, the salmon bento box, tastes better and has a lower chance of food poisoning, as he has tried the tuna bento box before and had a stomach

ache that night. He does not want the costumer, Jones, to know that the supermarket is actually selling some risky products from restaurant B for a good profit. He also does not want this poor university student to get a stomach ache like him last time. He decides to tell Jones that someone has ordered the tuna sushi bento box if Jones is going to get that one, but he would not say anything if Jones decided to get the salmon one. Jones, on the other hand, has many horrible and unpleasant memories about tuna. His ex-girlfriend loves tuna and always wants him to eat tuna with her every day. Jones has no appetite and is sick of any food with tuna in it. He quickly grabs the salmon sushi box to pay.

From this very similar example as the counterexample, there are indeed two cases such that the action of buying the salmon sushi box takes place. Case 1 is that Jones buys the salmon box because of an external factor – the memory of eating tuna food all the time with his ex-girlfriend. Case 2 is that Jones buys the salmon box because Black tells him the tuna one is taken already. Case 2 is caused by restaurant B's improperly cooked food which leads to Black's position, so Black is not responsible for it as well. Neither Jones or Black is morally responsible for the action of Jones buying the salmon box directly, because case 1 is caused by Jones' ex-girlfriend, while case 2 is caused by the restaurant B. This counterexample fails to reject the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, since the counterexample requires someone to be morally responsible for an action, and that person could not have done otherwise. Then, one might ask, what is the origin of this chain reaction? Who or what starts the first action that leads to the behaviour of Jones and Black and leads to the situation where no one is responsible for the purchase of the salmon bento box? There are too many undetermined factors that affect one to take a certain action, thus increasing the uncertainty of determining whether one is morally responsible for the action or not. This is why Frankfurt's counterexample that requires someone to be morally responsible for an action when that person could not have done otherwise fails; premise 2 is not necessarily true.