HARRY FRANKFURT

“ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY”

Scott Hagaman
Immanuel Kant famously wrote:

“For if the moral law commands that we ought to be better human beings now, it inescapably follows that we must be capable of being better human beings.” -Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason

The action to which the “ought” applies must indeed be possible under natural conditions. -Critique of Pure Reason

The basic idea here is just that if you ought (morally speaking) to do something, it is something you can do.

We will treat the sense of “can” in play as the “can-of-physical-possibility”.

Consider an action that you cannot perform, such as snapping your finger and curing everyone with Ebola. Now imagine that someone tells you that you ought to snap your fingers and cure everyone with Ebola. Wouldn’t a perfectly appropriate response to that be to say, “I can’t do that, and so of course it’s false that I ought to do it.” It is physically impossible for you to do that.

But sometimes, you ought to do things other than what you do, in fact, do. You aren’t perfect, after all.

But if ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, then you can do things other than what you do, in fact, do.
Suppose I tell you that you shouldn’t have performed some action A.

This seemingly implies that you should have performed some other action (perhaps just refraining from A’ing) instead.

And that you should have performed some other action instead seemingly implies that there was something else for you to do.

But that there was something else for you to do seemingly implies that you could have done something else instead.

Think about the oddness of telling someone that there was something else for them to do at a time, even though at that time, they couldn’t have done it.

Finally, that you could have done something else instead seemingly implies that you were free to do something else.
DETERMINISM

• What is Determinism? According to van Inwagen:

  “Determinism is the thesis that it is true at every moment that the way things then are determines a unique future, that only one of the alternative futures that may exist relative to a given moment is a physically possible continuation of the state of things at that moment. Or, if you like, we may say that determinism is the thesis that only one continuation of the state of things at a given moment is consistent with the laws of nature.” - “The Powers of Rational Beings: Freedom of the Will”

• If we miraculously “rolled back history” and started things over exactly as they were in 1930, then if Determinism is true, it follows that events would unfold again in exactly the same way they did unfold. (This example is a consequence of Determinism, not a statement of it.)

• More explicitly:

  • **Determinism**: The Laws of Nature and the State of the Universe at T together completely fix the State of the Universe after T.

  • **Determinism**: □ [(Laws of Nature & Total State of the Universe at Time T) —> Total State of the Universe at Time T+x ]

  • For mathematicians, it may help to think of Determinism as the view that the Laws of Nature are a function which takes the Total State of the Universe as an argument (input) and outputs as the value the unique next state of the universe.

  • Do not confuse Determinism with the doctrine that nobody’s will is free. Determinism is a claim about the way the world works. It does not mention freedom of the will at all.
DETERMINISM, FREEDOM, AND RESPONSIBILITY

- It seems to many people as if the following relationships hold between Determinism, Freedom, and Responsibility:

  - If someone is morally responsible for performing an action at some time, then they freely performed that action. (Notice that this is equivalent with the claim that if you don’t freely perform an action, then you aren’t morally responsible for performing it. Remember that “If P, then Q” is equivalent to “If not-Q, then not-P.”)

  - Suppose that I install a chip in your brain, which, if triggered, will literally force you to pick up a gun and shoot someone. I activate the chip and you do shoot the person. Are you morally responsible for shooting them? Of course not.

  - If Determinism is true, then nobody has freedom of the will.

  - We might think that if Determinism is true, the world is playing the role of the chip I installed in your head in the previous example.

  - If Determinism is true, then it looks as if there is only one course of actions you can perform. And the prior state of the universe together with the laws of nature forces you down this course. Thus it seems that you can do nothing other than what you do, in fact, do.

  - If Determinism is true, the nobody is morally responsible for anything.
THE PRINCIPLE OF ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES

- Let’s focus on the following two widely shared beliefs:
  
  - (1) If someone is morally responsible for performing an action, then they freely performed the action.
  
  - (2) If someone freely performed an action, then they were able to perform some other action instead.

- From these two claims, we can validly derive (by Hypothetical Syllogism) the following:
  
  - **Principle of Alternate Possibilities**: If someone is morally responsible for performing an action, they were able to perform some other action instead.

- Frankfurt wants to argue that the **Principle of Alternate Possibilities** (hereafter: **PAP**) is false. But if so, then either (1) or (2) must be false as well!
Frankfurt takes himself to have a decisive counterexample to PAP. It is so elegant and well-written that we will quote from it at length:

"Suppose someone — Black, let us say — wants Jones 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 Jones is about to make up his mind what to do, and does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones is going to decide to do something other than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do. [...] Now suppose that Black never has to show his hand because Jones, 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, Jones 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. It would be quite unreasonable to excuse Jones for his action, or to withhold the praise to which it would normally entitle him, on the basis of the fact that he could not have done otherwise. This fact played no role at all in leading him to act as he did. He would have acted the same even if it had not been a fact. Indeed, everything happened without Black’s presence in the situation and without his readiness to intrude into it."
THE CONCRETE CASE

- Frankfurt's description is abstract. Let's make it concrete:

  - You're going to the polling booth. The ballot contains two politicians: Mr. Evil and Mr. Good. Black wants you to vote for Mr. Evil. If Black predicts (and Black is always right when making such predictions) that you will vote for Mr. Good, Black will active a chip implanted in your brain which will force you to vote for Mr. Evil. But if Black predicts that you will vote for Mr. Good, he will do nothing.

  - In this case, it seems it is not open to you to vote for Mr. Good. You will be pulling the lever for Mr. Evil whether you want to or not.

  - Let's also add that you know that Mr. Evil is evil, and you know that Mr. Good is good.

  - You walk into the polling booth and vote for a Mr. Evil, in the most ordinary, mundane manner possible. Black has correctly predicted that this is what you will do, and has long since left your voting site to monitor someone else.

- There are two conclusions we might draw from this case. First, despite the fact that you could not have voted for Mr. Good, you were morally responsible and blameworthy for voting for Mr. Evil. Second, despite the fact that you could not have voted for Mr. Good, you freely voted for Mr. Evil.
THE UPSHOT

• We have noted that many people have the intuition that Determinism rules out moral responsibility.

• One way to read Frankfurt is to see him as trying to put pressure on this claim. Even if Determinism is true, we may be able to hold people morally responsible for their actions. Perhaps we needn’t fear that the truth of Determinism would undercut our ordinary moral practices?

• Frankfurt’s case doesn’t quite show this much, if it succeeds. Strictly, it only shows that Determinism wouldn’t undercut our moral practices because Determinism rules out alternate possibilities. There might be some other reason for which Determinism undercuts our ordinary moral practices.

• Consider the revised version of **PAP** which Frankfurt proffers:

  • **PAP*: A person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise.

• Note that if Determinism is true, you might perform an action you were determined to perform, but perhaps you perform that action not just because you were forced to, but also because you wanted to. Provided we can make sense of this, then **PAP* leaves open the possibility that you could both be determined to act as you do but also be held morally responsible for so acting.
Suppose we accept that PAP fails. Then it follows that at least one of the following must be false:

1. If someone is morally responsible for performing an action, then they freely performed the action.
2. If someone freely performed an action, then they were able to perform some other action instead.

Frankfurt can be best seen as challenging (1). However, if we think that you freely voted for Mr. Evil despite Black’s preparedness to intervene and force you to vote for Mr. Evil, then we might well think that you freely voted for Mr. Evil even if you couldn’t have done otherwise.

But if so, then (2) is false. So Frankfurt-style cases can be seen as challenging both (1) and (2).

But now suppose that (2) is, in fact, false. This makes it looks as if Determinism is, in fact, compatible with having free will. (One could resist this by holding that Determinism is incompatible with free will for reasons other than ruling out possible alternatives.)

Note: If Determinism is compatible with free will, then the Free Will Defense to the Logical Problem of Evil looks to be wrecked. Why?
COMPATIBILISMS AND INCOMPATIBILISM

• **Compatibilism**: It is possible for creatures to have freedom of the will in a Deterministic universe.
  
  • Alternatively: It is possible for creatures to have freedom of the will if Determinism is true.
  
  • Alternatively: The truth of Determinism does not rule out the possibility of freedom.

• **Incompatibilism**: If Determinism is true, then nobody is free.
  
  • Alternatively: In a deterministic universe, freedom is not possible.
  
  • Alternatively: The truth of Determinism would rule out freedom of the will.

• **Compatibilism** and **Incompatibilism** are compatibility claims. Neither of them says that anyone does/does not have freedom of the will or that Determinism is/is not true!

• **Determinism** is not, and should never be confused with, the claim that nobody is free.

• **Libertarianism**: Incompatibilism is true (and so Compatibilism is false) and there is at least some freedom of the will.

• **Semi-Compatibilism**: Determinism does not rule out moral responsibility.