

Frankfurt's compatibilist theory of free will

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1	An argument against incompatibilism	1
1.1	The principle of alternate possibilities	1
1.2	A counterexample to the principle	2
2	Free will and second-order volitions	2

So far we have been discussing various problems for the thesis that we have free will. All of these problems have had something in common: they have all been arguments that the future is in some sense fixed, or beyond our control. For example, Laplace suggested that the future was a necessary consequence of the past plus the laws of nature, and inferred from this deterministic view that we do not have free will. One way to respond to these challenges is try to find a way to block these various arguments for the view that the future is beyond our control. But another is to try to defend a view of free will which makes it compatible with the future being, in some sense, beyond our control. The view that free will is compatible with determinism is called *compatibilism*.

Harry Frankfurt is a prominent defender of a compatibilist view of free will. We will be reading one piece which can be read as an argument against incompatibilism ('Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility') and one which explains a view of free actions which has the consequence that free will is compatible with determinism ('Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person').

1 An argument against incompatibilism

1.1 *The principle of alternate possibilities*

Why might you think that free will is incompatible with the various forms of fatalism we have discussed? One possibility is that we are inclined to endorse the following principle of alternate possibilities:

A person's act is free if and only if that person could have done otherwise.

The natural thought is that if fatalism is true, that means that no one ever could have done otherwise; and therefore that, given the principle of alternate possibilities, no one ever acts freely.

1.2 A counterexample to the principle

A link between moral responsibility and free will. Why, although Frankfurt describes his argument as one which shows that one can be morally responsible even if one could not have done otherwise, it can be also plausibly taken to show that one can act freely even if one could not have done otherwise.

Beginning on p. 835, Frankfurt develops the example of Jones₄, which seems to provide a counterexample to the principle of alternate possibilities:

“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 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.

...

Now 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. It would be quite unreasonable to excuse Jones₄ for his action . . . 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. . . . Indeed, everything happened just as it would have happened without Black’s presence in the situation and without his readiness to intrude into it.”

Can you see why this example seems to conflict with the principle of alternate possibilities? How should the incompatibilist respond to this kind of example? Does incompatibilism require the truth of the principle of alternate possibilities?

2 Free will and second-order volitions

Let’s suppose that we agree with Frankfurt that the principle of alternate possibilities is false. Then it seems as though we have to come up with an understanding of what free action is which does not involve the claim that the agent could have done otherwise.

In “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”, Frankfurt presents such a view of what free action is. To understand this view, we’ll have to get clear on a few of the terms that he uses, beginning in §I of the article:

- *first-order desire*: a desire to perform some action. A desire to eat a bag of potato chips is a first-order desire; a desire for world peace is not.
- *will*: a first-order desire which is effective, i.e. that causes one to do what one desires to do. A desire to eat a bag of potato chips is one’s will. in Frankfurt’s sense, if that desire brings one to actually eat the bag of potato chips.
- *second-order desire*: a desire to have a certain desire. A desire that I should desire celery rather than potato chips is an example of a second-order desire.
- *second-order volition*: a desire that a certain desire be one’s will, i.e., a desire that a certain desire bring one to action. The above example can be turned into an example of a second-order volition if I desire, not just to have the desire for celery, but that the desire for celery rather than potato chips be effective in bringing me to eat celery rather than potato chips.

In §II, Frankfurt uses these notions to give an analysis of the concept of a person. We will be interested in his use of these notions to explain the nature of free action. He attempts this in §§III-IV.

The difference between freedom of action and freedom of the will.

Frankfurt on free will:

“It seems to me both natural and useful to construe the question of whether a person’s will is free in close analogy to the question of whether an agent enjoys freedom of action. Now freedom of action is . . . freedom to do what one wants to do. Analogously, then, the statement that a person enjoys freedom of the will means . . . that he is free to want what he wants to want. More, precisely, it means that he is free to will what he wants to will, or to have the will that he wants. Just as the question about the freedom of an agent’s action has to do with whether it is the action he wants to perform, so the question about the freedom of the will has to do with whether it is the will that he wants to have.

It is in securing the conformity of his will to his second-order volitions, then, that a person exercises freedom of the will.”

How this illuminates the distinction between the willing and the unwilling addict.

Some strengths of Frankfurt’s analysis of freedom of the will:

1. It explains freedom of the will in terms of a (relatively) un-mysterious concept, desire.

2. It explains our intuition that human beings, but not lower animals, have free will. Lower animals lack free will because they lack the second-order volitions which are constitutive of free will.
3. It explains why freedom of the will is worth wanting, in terms of desire satisfaction.

One problem for the analysis: third- (and higher-) order desires. A way around this problem.

Another interesting fact about this analysis of free will, given the kinds of views we have discussed so far, is that on this view free will appears to be perfectly compatible with determinism. As Frankfurt puts it:

“My conception of the freedom of the will appears to be neutral with regard to the problem of determinism. It seems conceivable that it should be causally determined that a person is free to want what he wants to want. If this is conceivable, then it might be causally determined that a person enjoys a free will. There is no more than an innocuous appearance of paradox in the proposition that it is determined, ineluctably and by forces beyond their control, that certain people have free wills and that others do not.”

The difference between its being causally determined that someone has free will and its being causally determined that someone freely does such-and-such. It appears that on Frankfurt's view both of these are possible.

If Frankfurt is correct about free will, it is perfectly consistent with the position of a theological fatalist like Edwards or a determinist like Laplace or d'Holbach to think that human beings have free will.

If Frankfurt's view of free will is correct, does that mean that, if God exists, it would have been within his power to create beings who had free will (and moral responsibility) and always chose the good? How does this affect Swinburne's reply to the problem of evil?