

Ethics // Spring 2024

Handout 14

Alternate possibilities: Frankfurt

PRINCIPLE OF ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES (PAP). If X is morally responsible for an action A , then he could have avoided performing A . (A logically equivalent formulation: If X could not have avoided performing A , then X is not morally responsible for A .) 1

PAP expresses the intuitively plausible idea that the content of freedom is the power to choose among different alternatives and to act on this choice.

FRANKFURT'S MAIN CLAIM. PAP is false: X may be responsible for performing A , even if he could not have avoided performing A . 1

In defending PAP we normally think of the situations in which a person is prevented from performing anything but A . But we can also think of such situations that, while rigidly fixing the eventual outcome, actually do not *produce* the action A .

PRINCIPLE OF COERCION. If X was coerced to perform A , then he did not perform A freely and is not responsible for A . 2

Coercion and moral responsibility are incompatible. But coercion also implies that X was unable to act otherwise. \Rightarrow The principle of coercion can be used to defend PAP.

Frankfurt argues there is a mistake here. It is true that: [X is coerced to perform A] \Rightarrow [X could not have avoided performing A and X bears no responsibility for A]. But PAP is still false.

COERCION AND THREAT. Suppose I act under a serious threat. Should I be held morally responsible for what I do under such conditions? Philosophers (Aristotle, Hobbes) usually agreed that I should. 2

Example 1. Let someone threaten me with ruin unless I sign this particular document. Then I would still be responsible—morally, though perhaps not legally—for signing the document. For I can very well choose not to sign and face the unpleasant consequences—even at the expense of losing my life.

The case is different with coercion. The principle of coercion rules out the very possibility of choice.

Question 2. What kind of coercion deprives an agent of his freedom?

Frankfurt examines the problem by considering situations that involve different kinds of threat and different abilities of the threatening agent.

GENERAL SETUP. At t_1 : Jones decides to perform A . At t_2 : someone threatens Jones with a very harsh penalty unless Jones performs A . At t_3 : Jones performs A . Should Jones be held morally responsible for performing A ? 3

JONES-1. He is so stubborn he pays no attention to any threats. And he would have performed A regardless of whether there was a threat. \Rightarrow No coercion is really involved. Easy.

JONES-2. He was extremely intimidated by the threat. Even if before he did *not* decide performing A , he would have performed A given this threat. In our situation (where he did decide to perform A before) he forgot about his earlier decision and was animated entirely by the threat and the fear it induced. \Rightarrow Jones-2 is not responsible for his action.

Question 3. Why exactly is Jones-2 not morally responsible for performing A ?

JONES-3 This is a typically complex case. The agent is neither indifferent to the threat, nor is completely 'paralysed' by it. The threat impressed him as it would have impressed any sensible person. Yet, he did A not because of the threat, but because of his prior decision to do A . \Rightarrow It is not clear whether Jones-3 was coerced, but it is clear that he was responsible for doing A . 4

Suppose though that we say Jones-3 was not coerced. Then we reject the idea that the mere presence of an irresistible threat makes the agent coerced. But if we say that Jones-3 was indeed coerced, then coercion does not preclude moral responsibility. 5

It could be that the case of Jones-3 refutes PAP. However: there is a sense in which Jones-3 could have acted otherwise, or decided otherwise (he could have defied the threat etc.).

JONES-4 Black wants Jones-4 to perform A . Black is all-powerful, but he uses his power sparingly. So he waits before Jones-4 made up his mind. If Jones-4 decides to perform A , Black does nothing. If Jones-4 decides not to perform A , Black intervenes to make Jones-4 *decide* to do A . \Rightarrow If Black never intervenes, then Jones-4 is clearly morally responsible even though he could not have decided/acted otherwise.

Example 4. Suppose Black is an evil neurosurgeon. In performing an operation on a brain patient Jones, he, unbeknownst to Jones, implants a chip into Jones' brain that allows him to monitor and control Jones' actions. Black is a fanatic hater of stray dogs, and so he is especially interested in Jones' interaction with those dogs. If Jones shows an inclination to be kind or indifferent to a particular stray dog, then Black's computer manipulates the chip to ensure that Jones *actually makes a choice* to kick that dog and proceeds to act on that choice. However, if Jones shows an inclination to kick the dog, Black's computer does not intervene in Jones' behaviour and merely monitors his brain processes. Now, suppose that on the present occasion Jones chooses to kick the dog without any intervention—just as he would have done had Black not implanted the chip. Then, according to Frankfurt, Jones is morally responsible for kicking the dog, even though he could not have *actually* chosen otherwise.

PAP is wrong, since it pins the explanation of an action on a wrong factor. The circumstances surrounding the action may be such that the agent could not have acted otherwise, but the action *actually* took place *regardless* of those circumstances. The usual excuses/explanations imply, though not literally say, that the prohibiting circumstances were the only factor of the action.

Question 5. Consider this objection to Frankfurt (and defence of PAP):

Jones-4 is responsible for [kicking the dog out of his own choice], because he could have done otherwise (i.e. not choose to kick). But Jones-4 is not responsible for [kicking the dog], because he indeed could not have not kicked it.

What is wrong, if anything, with this reasoning?

COMPATIBILISM AND INCOMPATIBILISM. Frankfurt's conclusion is sympathetic to compatibilism. We can protect the reality of freedom and responsibility without denying determinism. Note that it is anathema both to deterministic incompatibilists and *libertarian* incompatibilists. The latter believe in the reality of freedom, but also believe that such reality can only be assured upon the rejection of determinism.

BEGGING THE QUESTION? Libertarians argued that Frankfurt's scenario begs the question. Free choice, they say, is undetermined prior to its occasion (compare van Inwagen's open futures). If so, Black cannot know what Jones' choice will be *before* it actually happens. Then, in order to ensure the desirable outcome, he would have to intervene. But then: if Black remains idle, Jones would be responsible for his action, but he would also have alternative possibilities for action. If Black intervenes, Jones would not be responsible and he would also have no alternative possibilities for action. Thus, assuming the reality of free will, PAP is true: responsibility (and freedom) are, after all, necessarily linked to alternative possibilities.

I now want to say how determinists can similarly accuse Frankfurt of begging the question.

Example 6. Suppose Black is an adventurous neurosurgeon. In performing an operation on a brain patient Jones, he, unbeknownst to Jones, implants a chip into Jones' brain that allows him to monitor and control Jones' actions. Black is a fanatic believer in a gluten-free diet, and so he is especially interested in Jones' dieting habits. If Jones shows an inclination to choose a meal containing gluten, then Black's computer manipulates the chip to ensure that Jones actually makes a choice to have a different meal and proceeds to act on that choice. However, if Jones shows an inclination to have gluten-free meals, Black's computer does not intervene in Jones' behaviour and merely monitors his brain processes. Suppose now that, at today's lunch, Jones chooses to have potatoes without any intervention—just as he would have done had Black not implanted the chip.

Should Jones be held morally responsible for choosing to eat potatoes, even though he could not have *actually* chosen otherwise? The answer, I think, has a different tone than in the Example 4. We are likely to cite his habits, the ways potatoes affect his senses—in short, we can cite all sorts of empirical factors shrinking his responsibility to such an extent that it eventually disappears. It seems more plausible here, than in the Example 4, to say that the course of the world determined the way Jones acted. Yet, what is the essential difference between the two examples? I think the answer is that in the second example we can pinpoint (or hope to pinpoint) physical or physiological factors affecting Jones' behaviour. In the first example we cannot pinpoint such factors—but does it mean they do not exist or that they are unintelligible?