

PHIL 3923H: Honors Colloquium on Free Will  
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Frankfurt, Chapter 1

- The Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP): “. . . a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.” (1)

This principle has been widely accepted. Frankfurt will object to it, however, via a counter-example. He will then offer an alternative principle of morally responsible.

I.

- Distinguish:

- i) conditions that are sufficient for an outcome, from
- ii) conditions that bring it about.

They might come apart:

However, there may be circumstances that constitute sufficient conditions for a certain action to be performed by someone and that therefore make it impossible for the person to do otherwise, but that do not actually impel the person to act or in any way produce his action. (1–2)

II.

- Coercion and moral responsibility are generally thought to be mutually exclusive. If so, is it *because* coercion rules out alternate possibilities? Frankfurt answers “no”.

- The Jones example:

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? (3)

Well, that depends . . .

Jones<sub>1</sub>: Jones always acts for his (own) original reasons. So, the threat has no effect on him. He is morally responsible, but there was no coercion (and no deprivation of alternate possibilities).

Jones<sub>2</sub>: Quite the opposite of Jones<sub>1</sub>, the threat overwhelmed him so that he “forgot” his earlier reasons and acted only because of the threat. He is not morally responsible.

Jones<sub>3</sub>: He takes the threat seriously and would have acted for that reason if he did not already have his own reasons. However, he acts for his original reasons. (This might be hard to know, of course.) Jones<sub>3</sub> is morally responsible, though he could not have done otherwise.

### III.

- The Jones<sub>3</sub> case is a situation in which conditions that are sufficient for an outcome do not bring it about.

Lesson:

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. (5)

### IV.

- But, one could object, Jones<sub>3</sub> could do otherwise. So, it is not a counterexample to PAP. In light of this objection, Frankfurt tells a new story. In this new story Jones<sub>4</sub> really cannot do otherwise.

Suppose someone — Black, let us say — wants Jones<sub>4</sub> 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<sub>4</sub> 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 Jones<sub>4</sub> is going to decide to do something *other* than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones<sub>4</sub> is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones<sub>4</sub> decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do. (6)

Suppose that Jones<sub>4</sub> does that action for his own reasons. Then, Frankfurt claims that he is morally responsible for performing that action, although he could not have done otherwise. Why?

Indeed, everything happened just as it would have happened without Black's presence in the situation and without his readiness to intrude into it. (7)

V.

- Possible revision of PAP: One is not morally responsible for an action if he did it because he could not have done otherwise. (9) This revised principle still supports incompatibilism (of free will and determinism), Frankfurt claims. But, he thinks that this revised version is also false. Instead, Frankfurt endorses the following revision:

a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise. (10)

Frankfurt claims that this last principle does not conflict with compatibilism.