

PHIL 3923H: Honors Colloquium on Free Will
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Frankfurt, Chapter 3

I.

• An uncertainty:

It may in certain situations be difficult, or even impossible, to know whether or not an action has been performed . . . There may be no way of discovering whether he spoke the word in submission to the threat of further pain, or whether — his will having been overcome by the agony which he had already suffered — the word passed involuntarily through his lips. (26–27)

Frankfurt makes the following distinction and raises the following questions:

We might say that in instances of physical coercion the victim's body is used as an instrument, whose movements are made subject to another person's will. In those instances of coercion that concern me, on the other hand, it is the victim's will which is subjected to the will of another. How, in those cases, does coercion affect its victim's freedom? What basis does it provide for the judgment that he is not morally responsible for doing what he is made to do? (27)

• Frankfurt compares and contrasts *threats*, which involve penalties, and *offers*, which involve benefits, on pp. 27–29.

◦ Nozick suggests that something is a threat only if that which is proposed would make things worse than they would have been in the normal course of events. Likewise, something is an offer only if that which is proposed would make things better than they would have been in the normal course of events. Note his applications of this account to cases (1) and (2), p. 29. (1) is supposed to count as both a threat and an offer.

◦ Frankfurt objects that Nozick's account fails to distinguish between threats and poorer offers (e.g., the butcher who increases his prices).

To decide whether P_1 and the butcher are making threats or offers it is not essential to consider, as Nozick recommends, how

what they propose to do compares with what they *used* to do. Rather, it is necessary to consider how the courses of events their current proposals envisage compare with what would *now* happen but for their proposed interventions. (30)

- Frankfurt offers 3 conditions for a threat: the victim is *dependent* on another to fulfill a *need*, and that dependency is *exploited*. (33)

◦ On Frankfurt's account, both P_1 and P_2 issue threats *and* offers.

II.

- Not all threats are coercive. Coercion requires compulsion (the lack of choice). But many threats allow for choice.

◦ Frankfurt considers two additional conditions which might then account for coercion:

(1) the penalty with which he is threatened renders the action against which the threat is issued *substantially* less attractive to him than it would have been otherwise; and (2) he believes that he would be left worse off by defying the threat than by submitting to it. (37)

◦ But Frankfurt objects by counter-example: the threat to break a thumb unless the hospital is set on fire.

- Again, coercion requires a lack of choice.

But to have no choice in this sense [no reasonable choice] does not imply that a person deserves neither credit nor blame for what he does. Indeed, a person may well be praiseworthy for having made a plainly reasonable choice. Now coercion requires something more special than this. It requires that the victim of a threat should have no alternative to submission, in a sense in which this implies not merely that the person would act reasonably in submitting and therefore is not to be blamed for submitting, but rather that he is not morally responsible for his submissive action. (38–39)

◦ Coercive threats must appeal to motives and desires that the victim cannot resist. The agent might judge her inability to resist these motives to be either reasonable or unreasonable. She might decide to act in a panic or

with calm. And these motives might prove irresistible in some contexts, but not in others. (39)

◦ Sometimes we hold people in contempt because they are manipulated by certain motives and desires that they are unable to resist, though we think that they ought to be able to resist them. Nevertheless, such people are coerced.

◦ Q: What about the possibility of coercion by an *offer* that cannot be resisted? Frankfurt responds that coercion necessarily violates a person's autonomy (e.g., being moved against one's will) and that not all tempting offers do this (though some do). (41–42)

In submitting to a threat, a person invariably does something which he does not really want to do. Hence irresistible threats, unlike irresistible offers, are necessarily coercive. (43)

A “Frankfurt case” is discussed on p. 43.

• Coercion takes away free will and replaces the agent's will with that of the person who issued the threat.

◦ Non-human conditions can also threaten us and take away our free will — e.g., the avalanche (45).