

PHIL 3923H: Honors Colloquium on Free Will
Prof. Funkhouser
10/24/06
Frankfurt, Chapter 4

I.

- People sometimes perform actions that they judge to be preferable to any alternative action available to them, yet they have not acted willingly nor have they done what they “really” wanted to do. Frankfurt distinguishes 3 varieties of such cases.

- Type A cases are those in which the external situation one finds oneself in is “discordant” with one’s desires. This “discord” must be substantial, rather than, say, one’s situation simply being less than ideal. We often describe such situations as ones in which we must choose the least among evils.

Type A cases do not, by themselves, deprive agents of moral responsibility.

- Type B cases are those in which the discord is internal. Here, the conflict is between one’s first-order and second-order desires. The agent has a second-order desire not to be motivated by the first-order desire which is, in fact, effective.

This person’s denial that he has acted altogether willingly reflects his sense that in the conflict from which his action emerged he was defeated by a force which, although it issued from inside of him, he did not identify himself. For instance, he may have struggled unsuccessfully against a craving (effective first-order desire) to which he did not want to succumb (defeated second-order volition). (48)

The fact that something is a type B case can justify withholding moral responsibility.

- Type C cases are those in which the agent is unable to defy a threat. These are cases of coercion.

The situation of a person who succumbs to a threat because he is unable to defy it is not, accordingly, of Type A. Nor is it necessarily of Type B either, since there is no reason to assume

that a person who acts because of the irresistibility of a desire would prefer, given his alternatives, to be motivated by some different desire. The situation is thus of a distinguishable type, C, whose special characteristic is that the agent acts because of the irresistibility of a desire without attempting to prevent that desire from determining his action. (49)

An important comparison and contrast between type B and C cases:

Both in situations of Type B and of Type C, the agent is moved to act without the concurrence of a second-order volition: in the former case because his second-order volition is defeated, and in the latter because no second-order volition plays a role in the economy of his desires.

- Q: Are all and only free actions those actions that are not of the B or C types?

II.

- Willing addicts fit neither the B or C type. But, do they act freely? Locke says they do not, but Frankfurt defends the claim that they do act freely. A fine distinction is made:

For it is far from apparent that a person who is not free to refrain from performing a certain action cannot be free to perform it, or that he cannot perform it freely. (51)

Frankfurt points out that it is very implausible that a willing and unwilling addict are equally morally responsible for their actions. In fact, he claims that the willing addict is just as responsible as, because motivated in the same way as, the non-addict.

So, considerations of moral responsibility do not give us a reason to think that both the willing and unwilling addict act without freedom.

III.

- Frankfurt grants that, when the details are specified in a particular way, we could act freely even when our behavior is controlled by a devil or mad scientist.

The other possibility is that the D/n provides his subject with a stable character or program, which he does not thereafter alter

too frequently or at all, and that the subsequent mental and physical responses of the subject to his external and internal environments are determined by this program rather than by further intervention on the part of D/n. In that case there is no reason for denying that instances of the subject's behavior may be members of *W*. Nor, in my opinion, are there compelling reasons either against allowing that the subject may act freely or against regarding him as capable of being morally responsible for what he does. (53)

For Frankfurt, such people are free for the same reason that “normal” people are free — they have second-order volitions.

Q: Is this a position that compatibilists, in general, should take?

A very interesting comment:

What is at stake in their [e.g., the concept control] application is not so much a matter of the causal origins of the states of affairs in question, but X's activity or passivity with respect to those states of affairs. (54)

Here, Frankfurt understands activity in terms of identification with desires. Frankfurt then summarizes his position nicely:

... to the extent that a person identifies himself with the springs of his actions, he takes responsibility for those actions and acquires moral responsibility for them; moreover, the questions of how the actions and his identifications with their springs are caused are irrelevant to the questions of whether he performs the actions freely or is morally responsible for performing them. (54)

Q: Is the first sentence of the last paragraph of this section correct? Think about it.

IV.

- Actions performed under duress may still be performed freely — e.g., the bank robbery example. These cases are of type A. Note that we can hold the clerk morally responsible for his actions, though not blame him (because his actions were reasonable).

V.

- A nice passage:

It does not strike me as objectionable to say that a prisoner may come to act more freely — that is, to perform more of his actions freely — through having learned the lessons of Epictetus. But there will naturally remain as many things as before that he is not free to do, which he would be capable of doing if he were not imprisoned. Therefore it would not be correct to describe him as having been freed, or as having escaped the limitations of his imprisonment, by his study of Stoic philosophy. (56–57)