

PHIL 3923H: Honors Colloquium on Free Will
Prof. Funkhouser
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Frankfurt, Chapter 6

I.

- The problem of action: "... to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him." (69)

- Frankfurt notes that the dominant answer to this question, within philosophy, is some version of a causal theory. According to causal theories actions differ from happenings in, and only in, their causal histories. This means that actions and happenings can be indiscernible when they occur — there is no *inherent* difference between actions and happenings.

- But, this is what is most objectionable about causal theories.

This makes it impossible for them [causal theorists] to give any account whatever of the most salient differentiating characteristic of action: during the time a person is performing an action he is necessarily in touch with the movements of his body in a certain way, whereas he is necessarily not in touch with them in that way when movements of his body are occurring without his making them. (71)

- Frankfurt also thinks that there are obvious counter-examples to any causal theory. Take, for example, causal theories which hold that actions are all and only those movements that are produced and rationalized by a belief-desire pair. Frankfurt says we can always construct cases in which that causal antecedent — the belief-desire pair, in our example — leads to bodily movements, but the bodily movements obviously do not count as action. See the "spilling the glass" example, p. 70.

II.

- David Pears is presented as a philosopher who holds that there need not be any inherent differences between actions and happenings. So, Pears concludes that we must look elsewhere — to their causal histories — to distinguish them.

- Frankfurt grants that we cannot tell just by looking at bodily movements whether something is an action or happening. But, he disagrees with Pears in that Frankfurt thinks there is something different about actions and happenings at the time of their occurrence. What is this difference?

What is not merely pertinent but decisive, indeed, is to consider whether or not the movements as they occur are *under the person's guidance*. It is this that determines whether he is performing an action. Moreover, the question of whether or not movements occur under a person's guidance is not a matter of their antecedents. Events are caused to occur by preceding states of affairs, but an event cannot be guided through the course of its occurrence at a temporal distance. (72)

- Frankfurt also denies that complexity of movement is a good indicator of an action. Instead, apparent meaningfulness is a better indicator.

The performance of an action is accordingly a complex event, which is comprised by a bodily movement and by whatever state of affairs or activity constitutes the agent's guidance of it. (73)

III.

- Actions are purposive, or guided. But not all purposive movements count as behavior — e.g., pupil dilation.
- Intentional: "... instances of purposive movement in which the guidance is provided by the agent [as opposed, say, to some mechanism within him with which he does not identify]." (73)

Action = intentional movement

- But action need not be intended by the agent or self-consciously produced.
- 2 critical questions now emerge:
 1. What is required for guided movement?
 2. When is guided movement attributable to an agent?
- Frankfurt's answer to question #1:

Behavior is purposive when its course is subject to adjustments which compensate for the effects of forces which would otherwise

interfere with the course of the behavior, and when the occurrence of these adjustments is not explainable by what explains the state of affairs that elicits them. (74)

IV.

- Frankfurt allows that an action could be caused solely by alien forces or non-attitudinal causes — see the drug example, p. 76.

The assertion that someone has performed an action entails that his movements occurred under his guidance, but not that he was able to keep himself from guiding his movements as he did. There are occasions when we act against or independently of our wills. (77)

V.

- We must be careful not to set the requirements for action too high. For, surely the action/happening distinction applies to various non-human animals as well — even to the leg movements of a spider.