

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
Prof. Funkhouser
1/24/07
Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality”

I.

- Q: What accounts for the difference between one raising one’s arm and one’s arm rising without him raising it? More generally, what is the difference between *activity* and *passivity*? Frankfurt claims that the internal/external moving principle distinction fails to capture the active/passive distinction. Also, there is a distinction between activity and action — not all activity counts as action (e.g., drumming one’s fingers on the table absentmindedly).

- The active/passive distinction also applies to our thoughts (and other mental phenomena). Some examples of passive thoughts: obsessive thoughts, thoughts from “out of the blue”, etc.

It is not incoherent, despite the air of paradox, to say that a thought that occurs in my mind may not be something that *I think*. This can be understood in much the same way as the less jarring statement that an event occurring in my body may or may not be something that *I do*. (59–60)

- Frankfurt considers passions in particular, and he thinks that the active/passive distinction applies even to them.

- Penelhum: Every desire belongs to someone. All our desires are, quite obviously, *ours*. Every one of your desires is a *part* of you. For these reasons it is always inappropriate to fail to identify with one of your desires.

- Frankfurt responds:

However, we find it useful to reserve a sense in which a movement of this kind [the person who is tossed by the lurching vehicle] is strictly attributable not to the person at all but only to his body. We acknowledge that in this strict sense there is *no person* to whom it can be attributed — no person of whom it is “just as much part of him” as his actions and his activities are. Now why

may a desire not, in a similar way, be an event in the history of a person's mind without being that person's desire? Why may not certain mental movements, like certain movements of human bodies, in this sense belong to no one? . . . A person is no more to be identified with everything that goes on in his mind, in other words, than he is to be identified with everything that goes on in his body. (61)

○ Frankfurt says that those passions that we do not identify with can be just as forceful as those with which we do identify. There also could be epistemic difficulties determining whether a passion is one's own. But, these epistemic worries arise for bodily movements as well.

II.

- Easy examples of external passions — those introduced by hypnosis or drugs. A more difficult example: the man possessed with anger. (63)
- Frankfurt suggests the following account of external/internal passions. A passion is internal if we prefer to have it, external otherwise.

People are often inclined, at least until they reach a certain age, to construe what they really are as what they would like to be. They consider their “real” passions to be those by which they would like to be motivated, or with which they would prefer to be identified by those who know them, even though these passions may in fact be dimmer and less influential upon their behavior than others. (63)

But, Frankfurt turns around and objects to this account on the top of p. 63.

III.

- Disapproval of a passion is not sufficient for externality, but it is necessary. So, approval of a passion is sufficient for internality.
- The approval or disapproval of the passions must itself be internal (i.e., attributable to the agent) if it is to ground the internal/external distinction. But Frankfurt thinks this starts an infinite regress, so the internal/external distinction can not be captured by our attitudes toward passions.

IV.

- Frankfurt distinguishes between assigning a desire a lower ranking and rejecting a desire. Once a desire has been rejected, it becomes external.