

Free Will: Frankfurt & Watson

1. The Incompatibilism of Determinism and Moral Responsibility

(*) Take a Person P, action A and time t: P A's at t.

(**) Let P be born just after t-n.

(1) If determinism is true, then the natural laws (e.g. the laws of physics) together with all the facts about the state of the universe at t-n, entail that P A's at t.

Therefore,

(2) To do otherwise than A at t, P would have had to change the natural laws or alter facts about the universe at t-n.

(3) At no point in time could P have altered the natural laws or facts about the state of the universe at t-n. (Why? Because the laws are not under our control and t-n passed before P was born.)

Therefore,

(4) P could not have done otherwise than A at t.

(5) If P could not have done otherwise than A at t, then P did not A freely at t.

(6) If P did not A freely at t then either (a) P is not morally responsible for Aing at t, or
(b) P freely did something at some time prior to t that made it the case that she couldn't do otherwise than A at t.

(7) Given that what determines that P A's at t are the laws of nature and the state of the universe prior to when P was born, if determinism is true, then it is not the case that P did something to make it the case that she couldn't but A at t.

Therefore,

(8) If determinism is true, P is not morally responsible for Aing.

Therefore,

(9) If determinism is true, no one is morally responsible for anything.

2. Frankfurtian Compatibilism

Frankfurt denies premise (5), premise (6) or both. He argues that one can lack the ability to do otherwise and still be morally responsible for what one does. His argument revolves around the case of a "counterfactual" intervener. S embezzles the money without the intervention of B. But if S had tried not to embezzle (if he had shown signs of not following through on his evil intention), B would have intervened and made S embezzle. (We're to imagine that B has some way of exercising control over S when he wants to—a remotely controlled device in S's brain perhaps.)

It isn't clear whether Frankfurt thinks S's action is unfree but still morally responsible, or whether Frankfurt thinks S's action is freely done. (Different articles of Frankfurt's suggest different answers to this interpretive question. At one point he suggests that a person can act *from her own free will* even if *her will is not free*—this seems like an outright contradiction to me.) The first option means abandoning premise (6), the second means abandoning premise (5).

3. The Compatibilist's Burden

Regardless, Frankfurt must shoulder the compatibilist's burden. The Compatibilist must explain the difference between free action for which we're morally responsible and unfree action (for

which we're not). If freedom of action or moral responsibility doesn't require the ability to do otherwise, what does it require?

4. Skepticism

The skeptic about unfreedom just identifies free action with intentional action. S acts intentionally if the explanation for S's acting is (or involves) the fact that S wanted to A. S acts freely when acting if she then does what she wants to do. It follows that every intentional action is a free action. If you did it intentionally then you wanted to do it. If you wanted to do it, then you did it freely.

Question: Do I act freely when I hand over my wallet at gun point? Do I vote freely when I am threatened with death if I don't vote for candidate X? What if the desire that leads me to act as I do (or the psychological causes of my actions) are the products of brainwashing: the conscious manipulation of my motives and thinking by bad people who use drugs and torture to induce these motives in me? Does the fact that I act from these motives entail that I freely do what they've programmed me to do?

5. Frankfurt distinguishes between freedom of action and freedom of will.

You have *freedom of action* if you're able to do what you want to do.

You have *freedom of will* if you're able to will what you want to will.

An agent's will is her set of "decisive" first-order desires: i.e. those desires that do (or would) move her all the way to action.

A desire to have a certain will, is what Frankfurt calls a *second-order volition*: it is a desire to have one of your first-order desires move you to action.

Examples:

- (1) First-order desire: Your desire to become a rock star.
- (2) Second-order desire: Your desire to have (or keep) your desire to become a rock star.
- (3) Second-order volition: Your desire that your desire to become a rock star move you to act.

If you want to have your desire to become a rock star move you to act, then (according to Frankfurt) you *identify* with this desire. If you want to live a comfortable secure life, and you know that your desire to become a rock star may very well lead to actions that will risk your comfort and security (the music business is, after all, a risky career), identifying with your desire to become a rock star means wanting it to lead you to act – wanting it to win out over your desire for security in the competition to determine your behavior. If your fear of failure prevents you from pursuing the life of a rock star, but you still really identify with that desire (i.e. you still really want your desire to be a rock star to win out over your fear of failure), then your actions stem from an unfree will.

So this is Frankfurt's answer: "Suppose that a person has done what he wanted to do, that he did it because he wanted to do it, and that the will by which he was moved when he did it was his will because it was the will he wanted. Then he did it freely and of his own free will. Even supposing that he could have done otherwise, he would not have done otherwise: and even supposing that he could have had a different will, he would not have wanted his will to differ from what it was."

6. Watson's Criticisms of Frankfurt

1. What stops the infinite regress of higher-order desires?
2. What gives higher-order desires their *authority*?

Watson argues that we rarely form the second-order desires and volitions that are essential to Frankfurt's account of actions for which one is morally responsible. Instead, typical conflicts involve a tension between our **desires** and our **values**, where **our values are best correlated with our judgments about what we should do or what we have most reason to do**.

Typically, Watson says, our values are constituted by our desires so that we want to do what we judge we have most reason to do and when we judge that we should do something because it would be best we therein come to want to do that thing. But there are cases in which one can want something without valuing it at all.

Two Cases: (1) Feeling an urge to smother a baby who won't stop crying. (2) feeling an urge to smash an opponent in the face for being smug about his victory.

Question: Are these cases in which one wants (however momentarily) to smother the baby or smash the tennis player without valuing that action or outcome?

Illustrating the Difference between Frankfurt and Watson:

Consider a third case that might help us distinguish these two views of moral responsibility in an extensional manner:

Mary is in a dead-end marriage. Her husband is verbally abusive and disrespectful. They have no children. Mary wants to get a divorce to improve her life. Moreover, Mary is an atheist, she does not believe in God, but because she was raised a religious catholic, she still thinks of divorce as (in her words) "a bad thing." Mary wants a divorce to rid herself of a constant source or abuse; Mary wants to remain married because she doesn't want to do something bad. Now suppose Mary reflects on these two desires, and comes to want that her desire to remain married have sway over her actions. That is, she wants her desire to stay married to "win out" for control over her actions. She wishes she didn't want a divorce. She is glad that she wants to stay married. If her desire to get divorced is nevertheless motivationally stronger than her desire to stay married, does Mary act from a free will? Does she display autonomy?

Questions: What would Frankfurt say? What would Watson say? Which (if either) of them is right?

7. The Modality Problem for Frankfurt and Watson

Suppose we interpret Frankfurt as saying a person acts *from a free will* iff she acts in accordance with a second-order volition (i.e. she acts from a desire that she wants to have move her to act). How often does this happen?

Suppose we interpret Watson as saying that a person acts *from a free will* iff she acts from her values—i.e. she does the thing that she, in a cool reflective moment, believes she has the most reason to do. How often does this happen?

Question: Do these accounts lead to skepticism about the extent to which we exercise free will?

Suppose we interpret Frankfurt as saying a person is *morally responsible* for her action only if the desire that moved her to act was the one that she wanted to have move her to act. Will this excuse people of responsibility for actions for which we (intuitively) think they should be held responsible?

Suppose we interpret Watson as saying a person is morally responsible for her action only if she acts in accordance with her beliefs about what she has most reason to do. Will this excuse people of responsibility for actions for which we (intuitively) think they should be held responsible?

Question: Do killers and rapists typically reflect on their desires and endorse them upon reflection as the desires they want to have move them to action? Do killers and rapists typically articulate views of the good life or the life most worth living and retain their desires to rape and murder as desires for activities they think constitutive of the good or choiceworthy life? If not, do Frankfurt's and Watson's accounts lead to substantive skepticism about the extent of moral responsibility?

The solution: Say a person acts from a free will iff when she acts she is **able** to act in accordance with her second-order volition or value judgment regardless of whether or not she does so. Say a person is morally responsible for her action only if she could have acted in accordance with her second-order volitions regardless of whether she actually did so.

The "agent level ability" problem for the compatibilist: What does 'able' or 'could' mean here? Does it require that the agent have the ability to violate a law of nature? We're back where we started.

8. Recklessness, Weakness and Compulsion

Suppose S is obese and recognizes the problems his obesity causes for his health and social life. S continues to eat chocolate.

Recklessness: S acts recklessly if S falsely believes that he has more reason to X than not X but S should have known better. (That is, S's ignorance of the fact that it would be better for him not to X is culpable or blameable.)

Recklessness is an impairment of judgment, not an impairment of will.

Weakness: S acts in a weak-willed (or akratic) fashion if S knows that he has more reason not to X than to X, S nevertheless wants to X more than not X, and S **could** have resisted her desire to X and so could have refrained from X-ing.

Compulsion: S acts in a compulsive manner if S knows that he has more reason not to X than to X, S nevertheless wants to X more than not X, and S **could not** have resisted her desire to X and so could not have refrained from X-ing.

Questions: What is it to resist a desire? What distinguishes someone who is weak willed from someone who is strong willed? What distinguishes someone who is weak willed from someone who is compulsive? Must an action or be weak-willed to be blamable?