

Defending Alternative Possibilities

Diana Mertz Hsieh (diana@dianahsieh.com)

Freedom and Responsibility (Phil 6100, McKenna)

1 February 2005 (Spring 2005)

Frankfurt on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities

The Principle of Alternative Possibilities asserts that “a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.”¹ So for John to be justly praised for keeping his promise to Mary, he must have been capable of breaking that promise, even if not at all inclined or likely to do so. Conversely, if breaking the promise was genuinely impossible for John, perhaps due to strong hypnosis or a brain lesion, then he warrants no moral praise for keeping it. The Principle of Alternative Possibilities thus identifies the availability of alternative actions to the agent as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of that agent bearing moral responsibility for his actual actions.

Until relatively recently, philosophers concerned with questions about freedom of the will generally regarded the Principle of Alternative Possibilities as beyond question or doubt. Although generally friendly to libertarians and irrelevant to hard determinists, the principle imposed a substantial burden upon compatibilists. Given their overarching commitment to the possibility of free will and moral responsibility within a fully deterministic universe, compatibilists faced the difficult (if not impossible) task of showing how a person could do otherwise even though fully determined. The publication of Harry Frankfurt’s 1969 paper “Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility” turned the philosophical debate surrounding this issue on its head.² His arguments against the Principle of Alternative Possibilities suggested and supported a different tack for the compatibilist, namely that a person might be fully morally responsible for his actions despite being unable to do otherwise. From the resulting new perspective, the basic compatibilist claim that determinism need not conflict with free will and moral responsibility seemed far more plausible.

In essence, Frankfurt’s paper undercut the plausibility of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities by developing a type of counter-example in which an agent is morally responsible for his actions even though he could not have done otherwise. In these “Frankfurt-style” cases, a person is moved to action by his own internal reasons and desires, blissfully unaware that he was actually unable to do otherwise thanks to an alert causal intervener prepared to force his performance of the action if necessary. In cases requiring no causal intervention, the person seems to be morally responsible for his action, even though he could not have done otherwise. Frankfurt’s own particular example, although somewhat sketchy, is worth recounting:

Suppose someone—Black, let’s say—wants Jones to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits until Jones is about to make up his mind what to do, and he does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones is going to decide to do something *other* than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones is going to decide to do something else, Black takes effective

¹ Harry Frankfurt, “Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility,” in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 167.

² *Ibid.*

steps to ensure that Jones decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do. Whatever Jones' initial preferences and inclinations, then, Black will have his way.³ This particular example of Jones and Black is intended to be an instance of a general class of "IRR" cases in which "there [are] circumstances that constitute sufficient conditions for a certain action to be performed by someone and that therefore make it impossible for the person to do otherwise, but that do not actually impel the person to act or in any way produce his action."⁴ If any such cases are genuinely possible, then Frankfurt has shown the Principle of Alternative Possibilities to be false.

Before considering the strengths and weaknesses of two of the common libertarian defenses of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, let us clarify the necessary conditions of a genuine counter-example to that principle. Given the simple if-then structure of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (i.e. if morally responsible then could have done otherwise), a counter-example to the principle must both affirm the antecedent and deny the consequent. It must meet the following two conditions:

- Condition #1: The person is morally responsible for the action performed.
- Condition #2: The person could not have done otherwise.

In addition, Frankfurt's analysis of various cases of ordinary coercion suggests an additional constraint:

- Condition #3: The person's action is not determined by the circumstances that make him unable to do otherwise.

Condition #3 is not strictly necessary for a given case being a counter-example to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, although it is necessary for it to be a "Frankfurt-style" or "IRR" case. Nonetheless, it seems to identify the only plausible overlap between Conditions #1 and #2. If a person's action *was* determined by the circumstances that made him unable to do otherwise, then that person would no longer seem to be morally responsible for his action. For example, when Black intervenes (such that Jones' actions are determined by the very same circumstances that render him unable to do otherwise), we no longer regard Jones as morally responsible for his action.

The explicit identification of these three conditions of a genuine Frankfurt-style counter-example to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities clarifies the debate over the relevance of alternative possibilities to ascriptions of moral responsibility. Careful and detailed inspection of standard (i.e. prior-sign) Frankfurt-style scenarios reveals a failure to meet at least one of these three conditions, however the scenario might be tweaked by the compatibilist. In such cases, either the person is not plausibly morally responsible for his action, the person is faced with alternative possibilities, or the person's actions are determined by the same factors that make him unable to do otherwise. Yet not all such strategies are equally effective, as we shall see in comparing the Dilemma Defense with the Flicker of Freedom Defense.

The Dilemma Defense

The Dilemma Defense of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities developed by David Widerker in "Libertarianism and Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities" focuses on the precise nature of the relationship between the sign observed by Black (the causal

³ Ibid., 172-3.

⁴ Ibid., 168.

intervener) and the action taken by Jones (the moral agent).⁵ In essence, Widerker persuasively argues that whatever the proposed relationship between sign and action, the example is not a genuine Frankfurt-style counter-example to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities. First, imagine that the sign is “causally sufficient” for the action or “indicative of a state that is causally sufficient” for the action. In that case, the example is not a genuine Frankfurt-style case because “the factor that makes it impossible for Jones to avoid [the action] *does* bring about that decision.”⁶ Condition #3 (IRR) has been violated. Second, imagine that the sign merely reliably predicts Jones’ future action or that Jones still freely decides how to act. In that case, Jones is still free to do otherwise after displaying the sign: he might yet act out of character.⁷ Condition #2 (alternative possibilities) has been violated. Frankfurt and his defenders are thus subject to a dilemma in which either horn prevents a counter-example to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities from being genuine.

Notably, the fact that a claim of causal sufficiency between sign and action violates Condition #3 does not indicate whether the ultimate conflict lies with Condition #1 (moral responsibility) or Condition #2 (alternative possibilities). That determination seems to depend upon the particulars of the case under consideration. For example, if the firing of neurons around a lesion in Jones’ brain first caused him to quiver and then caused him to punch his wife, we would generally not regard him as morally responsible for that violence. Condition #1 would be satisfied, but Condition #2 would not. In contrast, if brooding over some embarrassment created earlier in the day by his wife first caused Jones to quiver and then caused him to punch his wife, we might regard him as capable of doing otherwise, i.e. of not brooding. That interpretation would be dangerous, however, for it would lead us into the quicksand of the Flicker of Freedom Defense. Instead, as Widerker suggests, the libertarian ought not accept the sort of causal necessitation found in this sort of case, meaning that again Condition #1 would not be satisfied (if the example is even coherent).⁸

Given the obvious strength of this Dilemma Defense, Frankfurt’s comments on the relationship between the sign and the action of the agent are noteworthy. In a footnote, he writes:

The assumption that Black can predict what Jones will decide to do does not beg the question of determinism. We can imagine that Jones has often confronted the alternative—A and B—that he now confronts, and that his face has invariably twitched when he was about to decide to do A and never when he was about to decide to do B. Knowing this, and observing the twitch, Black would have a basis for prediction. This does, to be sure, suppose that there is some sort of causal relation between Jones’s state at the time of the twitch and his subsequent states. But any plausible view of the decision or action will allow that reaching a decision and performing an action both involve earlier and later phases, with causal relations between them, and such that the earlier phases are not themselves part of the decision or the action. The example does not require that these earlier phases be deterministically related to still earlier events.⁹

⁵ David Widerker, "Libertarianism and Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Frankfurt, "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," 172n3.

Scrutinizing those remarks in light of the Dilemma Defense shows that Frankfurt is straddling the fence between determinism and probability to make his example plausible. Imagine that Black (knowing Jones' history of twitching all and only when about to decide upon A) will intervene to force Jones to do B only if Jones twitches. For the scenario to work as a Frankfurt-style case, Jones must never ever fail to twitch before deciding upon A. If he ever did perform that sequence, after all, then Black would not intervene, Jones would perform A rather than B, and Jones freedom to decide otherwise despite the sign would be revealed. The simple fact of Jones' perfectly consistent history of not-twitch-then-A and twitch-then-B does not guarantee that pattern in the future; only some deterministic relationship between the sign and the action can eliminate the confounding sequence of twitch-then-A. Yet Frankfurt explicitly denies such a deterministic relationship in the passage above—and so he must, since such determinism would beg the question against his libertarian critic and violate his own Condition #3 by making Jones determined by the same circumstances that rendered him unable to do otherwise. In essence then, for the scenario to function as a counter-example to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, the relationship between the sign and the action (1) cannot be deterministic (to satisfy Condition #3) and (2) must be deterministic (to satisfy Condition #2). In general, such prior-sign examples are only plausible as counter-example to the extent that they straddle the fence between determinism and indeterminism, vaguely implying each at various times. Ultimately then, Widerker's Dilemma Defense shows that any use of a prior sign to satisfy Condition #3 (i.e. to carve out some space in which Condition #1 and Condition #2 do not conflict) is untenable because the details of the scenario always reveal some violation of the necessary conditions.

The Flicker of Freedom Defense

At least in outline, the Flicker of Freedom Defense described (and then attacked) by John Fischer in "Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities" seems to adopt the same basic strategy of the Dilemma Defense, namely that of identifying some unavoidable violation of the necessary conditions for Frankfurt-style examples in the proposed counter-examples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities. In general, the advocate of the Flicker Defense stands ready to identify some capacity to do otherwise in the moral agent just prior to the first moment of possible interference by the causal intervener—no matter how small. The agent's apparent moral responsibility for the final action is then attributed to the alternative possibility of that prior "flicker of freedom." Consequently, no Frankfurt-style case can satisfy Condition #2, for all involve some alternative possibility, and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities stands untouched. In the course of rejecting the Flicker Defense, Fischer does concede that "it is hard to see how a Frankfurt-type example could be constructed which would have absolutely no such flicker" because such examples require "an alternative sequence in which intervention is triggered in some fashion or other."¹⁰ Thus the total satisfaction of Condition #2—in the sense of ruling out *all* alternative possibilities—seems impossible. Some flicker of freedom can always be identified just prior to the sign used by the causal intervener. However, the strength of that objection to Frankfurt-style cases comes at the steep price of absurd implications about the sources of moral responsibility.

The Flicker Defense invites us to consider a range of Frankfurt-style cases in which Black will only intervene just before / just as / just after (A) Jones initiates X, (B) Jones commits

¹⁰ John Fischer, "Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities," in *Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities*, ed. David Widerker and Michael McKenna (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 31.

to X, (D) Jones decides upon X, (E) Jones inclines to do X, (F) Jones deliberates about X, or (G) considers doing X. No matter how far back in time the possible intervention by Black is located, Jones is still capable of doing otherwise the moment before. Yet in moving from Case A to Case G, the scope of Jones' freedom to do otherwise also becomes more restricted. In Case A, Jones is free to consider, deliberate about, decide upon, commit to, and perhaps even initiate X, while in Case G, Jones is not even capable of considering X. The bright light of freedom in Case A is reduced to a dim flicker by Case G. Despite those differences, the Flicker Defense accepts that Jones is just as morally responsible for doing X in Case G as in Case A. As this progression of cases indicates, the compatibilist can all-too-easily reduce the flicker of freedom to some wholly insignificant alternative possibility, i.e. to an "alternative possibility [that] is not sufficiently *robust* to ground the relevant attributions of moral responsibility."¹¹ Thus Fischer writes that "even if the possible event at the terminus of the alternative sequence (in the case of Jones and Black) is indeed an alternative possibility, it is highly implausible to suppose that it is *in virtue* of the existence of such an alternative possibility that Jones is morally responsible for what he does."¹²

Consider, for example, a case in which Jones tortures his neighbor's puppies one evening due to a feeling of annoyance for failing to return his lawnmower. If Black will intervene if and only if Jones does not feel sufficiently annoyed by noon, then Jones' freedom to do otherwise is limited to his feeling sufficiently annoyed or not until noon; after that point, he has no freedom to do otherwise. The flicker theorist must then say that Jones is responsible for his evening puppy torture solely in virtue of his noontime feelings of annoyance. The problem with that implication is two-fold. First, it violates the epistemic condition of moral responsibility, in that Jones likely has no reason to even suspect his ordinary feelings of annoyance will culminate in the torture of puppies. Second, in ordinary cases (i.e. those without Black poised to intervene), Jones will be judged morally responsible for his puppy torture in virtue of his acting upon a decision to engage in that activity, not some annoyance experienced hours earlier. Thus it seems strange and ad hoc to locate the source of the moral responsibility in the noontime feelings when Black is present. Similarly, if Black was forced to intervene only at some later point (such as when Jones realized that indulging his desire for revenge with Smith's puppies would be wrong), we would not still regard Jones as morally culpable for his torture of the puppies due to his prior annoyance, but excuse him entirely. Perhaps even more strangely, Fischer considers a Frankfurt-type case in which the sign exhibited by Jones is read by Black "prior to initiating any process of decision-making," such that the flicker of freedom is reduced to Jones' "power to show the relevant sign" or not.¹³ In that case, a totally trivial action—such as wrinkling the nose or whistling "Yankee Doodle Dandy"—might be the source of Jones' moral responsibility for torture.

Ultimately then, the Flicker Defense preserves the Principle of Alternative Possibilities only by embracing an outlandish theory about the source of moral responsibility. At best, it represents a Pyrrhic victory against the compatibilist. Given its initial promise and its use of the same basic strategy as the Dilemma defense (i.e. that of rejecting proposed Frankfurt-style cases as failing to meet their own necessary conditions), we might wonder precisely how it goes so awry. The basic reason seems to be that it focuses on the events up through the exhibition of the sign, while wholly ignoring the problematic relationship between the sign and the action. As a result, the compatibilist can push the sign further away from the action, both with respect to time

¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 31.

and relevance. To retain their basic objection, the Flicker Theorist must then accept increasingly more restricted and less significant alternative possibilities. In other words, once the Flicker Theorist accepts the critical equivocation concerning the relationship between sign and action identified in the Dilemma Defense, his only method of rejecting Frankfurt-style cases is to accept a wholly implausible account of the sources of moral responsibility. However promising the Flicker Defense of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities may seem, it ought to be rejected in favor of the Dilemma Defense.