

18. FREE WILL: COMPATIBILISM AND LIBERTARIANISM

FRANKFURT'S ACCOUNT OF FREEDOM

First: Distinguish amongst your desires, between those that are effective, and those that are not. An effective desire is one that actually issues in action. Thus you might both want to go to Mexico, and go to France. If you go to France, that is the desire that is effective. Note that you can both desire to do something and desire to not do it. But only one of these can be effective. Frankfurt identifies a person's will with their effective desires.

Second: Distinguish, amongst your desires, between first order desires and second order desires. A first order desire is a desire for anything other than a desire; a second order desire is a desire for a desire. So, for instance, you might have a first order desire to smoke a cigarette, and a second order desire that you desire not to smoke a cigarette. A second order desire might or might not be a desire that its corresponding first order desire be effective. Thus I might wish that I wanted to give all my money to charity, since I might think that having such a desire would show me to be an excellent person; but I might nonetheless not actually want that desire to be effective. I might think it would be terrible if I actually did give all my money away. But when a person does want the first order desire to be effective, when they want it to be their will, Frankfurt calls this a second order volition.

Some creatures have no second order volitions. Frankfurt calls such creatures wantons. He claims that non-human animals and children are all wantons in this sense. He contrasts wantons with persons, who do have second-order volitions. (This seems a bit stipulative; wouldn't we say that an adult human being who had no volitions was still a person?) As an example, compare two sorts of drug addicts, a wanton and an unwilling person. The person wants not to want the drug; but his craving is too strong. In contrast the wanton has no desires about his desire; he is indifferent to being an addict. (Note that the wanton can still have contradictory desires; he might both want and not want the drug; the important thing is that he has no preference as to which of these desires triumphs.)

Now Frankfurt is in a position to define freedom. He thinks there are two aspects. Firstly, there is the aspect we have already looked at: a person's actions are free in so far as they stem from their desires; that is, if they had desired differently, they would have acted differently. But for Frankfurt this is merely freedom of action. In addition a person has freedom of will (i.e. their effective desires are free) in so far as they can control their desires. That is, a person has free will just in case they have second order volitions, and they can bring their first order desires into line with them. (Frankfurt thinks that a person can lose their freedom of action and still have freedom of will; for instance if they do not realize that they cannot act they might still go on freely controlling their will in accord with their second order volitions.) So we can see why the cases we looked at earlier aren't cases of free will. The dog and the small child don't have free will, because they are wantons; they lack second-order volitions. The unwilling drug addict lacks free will for a different reason; he has a second order volition, but it does not control his effective desire. The kleptomaniac is similar. Similarly you do not have free will if you act on a desire that is implanted in you by hypnotism when you have a second order volition not to have that desire. (Although presumably if you do want to have that desire—perhaps you paid a

hypnotist to get you not to want cigarettes because you thought that was the best way of quitting—then the act is still one performed from free will.)

WORRIES ABOUT FRANKFURT'S ACCOUNT

In pushing the problem up one level (from first order desire to second order) has Frankfurt really solved it? Two worries: (i) are second order desires really so special? Consider Jeanette Kennett's example of wanting to want strawberries (because it would be socially useful). (ii) Suppose that I implanted a second order desire in you by hypnosis. Then surely you wouldn't have free will if you got your desires to conform to that; but Frankfurt's account seems to have the consequence that you would. Of course, we could always then insist that there must be a third order desire; but suppose that too were implanted by means of the microchip, or by hypnotism? Whatever level we go to, we can wonder whether that desire is held freely; and then we seem to need to go up another level. We are in a regress. Frankfurt's response to worries like this is to say that there are certain desires that we identify with; and that free will consists in getting our desires into line with these. But what makes something a desire that we identify with? We have seen that it isn't just a matter of level. So it looks as though Frankfurt has left the central issue unanswered.

TWO WAYS FOR COMPATIBILISTS TO GO

Internal: a free action is one that is linked in some way to the agent's attitudes. Perhaps Frankfurt didn't get it quite right, but he was on the right lines. Free actions are those that reflect the agent's desires, values, beliefs etc in some way. Problem with this approach: all of these features can be manipulated.

External: it is not enough that a free action is tied to one's own internal states. Those states need to be tied to the world. So, Kant thought that one wasn't free if one was fooled by a lying promise, since to be free one has to grasp the nature of the world. One way of developing this thought: to act freely one has to grasp the true and the good. This certainly constrains the possibility of manipulation. However, it risks making the free bad action impossible.

One case to think about: Phineas Gage.

ANOTHER POSSIBILITY: LIBERTARIANISM

Put aside the question of whether libertarianism is compatible with what science tells us. Is it coherent in its own right?

Two plausible conditions on any libertarian account:

The Explanation condition: the account gives us an explanation of why the agent did one thing rather than another.

The Ultimacy condition: the ultimate explanation of why the agent did one thing rather than another resides in the agent (that the agent did it) and nowhere else.

Then the problem is as follows: the Ultimacy condition requires indeterminism. But undetermined events cannot, by their nature, be explained. And so the Ultimacy condition is incompatible with the Explanation condition.

Two notions of explanation: Take a genuinely chance event: for instance, suppose that a given radium atom decays at a certain time. Suppose that that decay in turn causes an alarm to be triggered. Can we give an explanation of why the alarm goes off? In a sense we can: we mention the radium atom, and of how its decay interacted with the alarm. But in another sense we can't: we can't give an explanation of why the alarm went off *rather than didn't go off*. This is because we cannot give an explanation of why the radium atom decayed rather than didn't decay: its decay is undetermined. David Lewis, to whom this distinction is due, calls these different sorts of explanations 'plain' explanations and 'contrastive' explanations. In an indeterministic case we can give a plain explanation of why something happened, by charting the sequence of indeterministic events that led up to it. But we can't give a contrastive explanation of why that event happened rather than some other. And it seems that what we want in the free will discussion is a contrastive explanation: we want to know why the agent did one thing rather than another.

So, imagine two identical agents (same history, same mental states, etc.), each faced with a difficult moral choice. A makes the virtuous choice. B makes the vicious choice. If libertarianism is true, that should be possible. How do we explain why each of them chose the option they did, rather than the other? It doesn't look as though we can. And if we can't, does it make much sense to hold one responsible and the other not? Doesn't it just look random?

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