

THE PRINCIPLE OF ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES *

IN spite of rather extreme differences on other fundamental issues, participants in the free-will controversy have tended to share a belief in the truth of a thesis that has been referred to recently as "the principle of alternate possibilities" (hereafter: PAP).[†] The principle states that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise. The dispute about the compatibility of determinism and moral responsibility has centered on questions about the analysis of 'could have done otherwise' or about the conditions under which PAP would be satisfied; the questions that have been raised have concerned the interpretation of the principle rather than its truth. In a recent paper, however, Harry Frankfurt has tried to resolve the compatibility question by arguing that PAP is actually false. Furthermore, he gives reasons for supposing that the principle cannot be amended in such a way that the traditional problems reappear. Instead, he thinks he can show that the principle must be replaced by another one which does not conflict with the view that determinism is compatible with moral responsibility. Frankfurt's argument is worth considering not only because of the promise that would come from undercutting an assumption held in common by opposed parties in an apparently deadlocked dispute, but because, as I think, he really does produce a convincing counterexample to the principle in question. Unfortunately, it is a good deal less clear whether he has shown that the principle must be abandoned in favor of a principle which is consistent with the thesis of the compatibility of determinism and moral responsibility. In this discussion note I shall try to show why Frankfurt's arguments do not establish that more ambitious point.

The argument against the principle rests, essentially, on a counterexample.[‡] In somewhat condensed form it runs as follows. Suppose that someone—call him Black—wants Jones to perform a certain action and that he is in a position to take steps that will guarantee that Jones will perform the action. Black prefers not to take these steps unless it is necessary, however, and so does nothing

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† Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," this *JOURNAL*, LXVI, 23 (Dec. 4, 1969): 829-839.

‡ Frankfurt first develops his case in terms of some examples involving coercion. I do not deal with them here, however, since they do not create any additional problems for PAP beyond those I take up and because they appear to depend on assumptions about coercion that require the sort of discussion that would be out of place here.

unless it becomes clear to him that Jones is going to decide to do something *other* than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear to him that Jones is going to decide to do something else, Black takes the steps which guarantee that Jones will decide to do, and actually do, what he wants him to do. We are to assume, naturally, that Black is an excellent judge of such matters. As to the steps we are to imagine that Black will take to make certain that things run according to design, Frankfurt suggests that anyone with a theory concerning the meaning of 'could have done otherwise' may describe whatever measures he would regard as sufficient to guarantee that, in the relevant sense, Jones cannot do otherwise—he may pronounce an awful threat, give him a potion, manipulate the minute processes of his brain, etc. Or, one may even eliminate Black altogether and suppose that the role played by him is played, instead, by natural forces involving no will or design at all. Finally, we are asked to suppose that Black simply finds it unnecessary to take the steps in question, since he infers, correctly, that Jones will decide to do and actually will do the thing that Black wants him to do—on his own. But since Black is an excellent judge of such things, we can be sure that Jones would have acted as he did even if his initial preferences had been different, for then Black would have taken the steps to which we have referred. So, whichever way we have it, Jones will behave as Black wants him to; there are no alternate possibilities. But as long as Jones actually behaved as he did for reasons of his own, there is no reason to suppose that he does not bear full moral responsibility for his act.

Now, it seems to me that this really is a counterexample to the principle as it is commonly stated. The only serious difficulties I can think of are connected with the suggestion that Black can predict Jones's decision. For, undoubtedly, some will think that Black's supposed ability, if it is to be foolproof, must be based on a knowledge of something that *causes* Jones to decide and to act as he does and that, if this is the case, the allegation that he bears moral responsibility for his action begs the question of whether one can bear moral responsibility for actions that are caused. For it is commonly argued that if an action has been caused then the agent could not have done otherwise, etc.² I think that such charges can

² In a footnote (fn. 3, p. 835) Frankfurt tries to meet objections of this type by arguing (correctly, I believe) that his example does not require universal determinism. However, he appears to concede that his example does require that the decision was caused, and I suspect that some hard determinists will think that this concession is enough. Since the move is available, I think it is wiser to skirt these issues as I suggest rather than try to rebut them.

be rebutted and that the case, as it stands, will serve the purpose for which it was intended. But I shall not enter into these issues, for they turn on a purely *ad hominem* feature of the example, viz., the fact that it involves Black, an agent who sets certain forces in operation only if he knows that otherwise Jones will behave contrary to his design. All these problems can be skirted by following the suggestion that we imagine a case with the same structure, but allow the role played by Black to be played by purely natural forces.³

The critical difficulty is not with the example itself but with the question whether it calls for a total abandonment or merely a modification of PAP. The force of the counterexample comes from two factors: (a) the fact that Black would have seen to it that Jones decided and acted as he did regardless of his initial preferences, and (b) that Jones actually decided and acted as he did without Black's interference. Factor (a) guarantees that Jones could not have done otherwise, while factor (b) guarantees that he bears moral responsibility for his action. It is possible for both conditions to be satisfied just because factor (a) states a contrary-to-fact conditional. It ensures that Jones would have acted as he did regardless of his initial preferences, but it plays no role in the explanation of his action. It does not figure at all among the conditions that actually brought it about that he decided and ultimately acted as he did. Since Jones did not act as he did because of the factor that made it impossible that he do otherwise, that factor cannot be relevant to the assessment of his responsibility. The trouble with PAP is that it fails to reckon with the fact that there may be conditions that make it impossible for a man to act in any other way than he does, although those conditions in no way bring it about that he behaves as he does.

This suggests that the principle should be tightened up to cover the possibility illustrated by the counterexample. It would appear that this can be done by adopting PAP': A man is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it *because* he could not have done otherwise.⁴ This implies that the fact that a man could

³ Suppose that the presence of a certain atmospheric reaction always causes Smith to decide to attack the person nearest to him and to actually do so. Suppose also that he always flushes a deep red when he considers and decides *against* performing an act of violence and that under certain circumstances the atmospheric reaction is triggered by the appearance of just this shade of red. Now imagine that on a day on which circumstances are favorable to the triggering of the reaction, Smith considers whether or not to strike a person with whom he is conversing, decides in favor of it, and forthwith does so.

⁴ For convenience in exposition I borrow this way of phrasing PAP' from Frankfurt. He does not, however, explicitly state how the possibly troublesome

not have done otherwise exempts him from moral responsibility only if the factors that render it impossible for him to do otherwise actually bring his action about. This covers the counterexample and squares, I think, with our sense of the intention of the original principle; it merely takes care of a loose end. Furthermore, this amendment would not materially affect the arguments of philosophers who have relied on PAP to show that determinism and moral responsibility are incompatible. If a person's having been causally determined to behave as he did implies (as philosophers who hold the incompatibility thesis believe they can show) that he could not have done otherwise, then the fact that his action was causally determined will imply that he acted as he did because he could not have done otherwise. For, if determinism is true, the factors that guarantee that one could not have done otherwise (i.e., the causes) are the very factors which bring the action about and hence which are sufficient to explain it. Of course, the compatibility question itself cannot be resolved until it can be ascertained whether determinism really does imply "could not have done otherwise" (in the relevant sense), but the point is that PAP will serve the purpose of hard-determinist arguments just as well as PAP. Frankfurt anticipates this move but thinks it is faulty. He agrees that hard determinists can get along with PAP⁶ as well as they can with PAP, but he thinks that PAP⁶ is not a satisfactory modification. He says,

Suppose a person tells us that he did what he did because he was unable to do otherwise. . . . We do often accept statements like these (if we believe them) as valid excuses. . . . But I think that when we accept such statements as valid excuses it is because we assume that we are being told more than the statements strictly and literally convey. We understand the person who offers the excuse to mean that he did what he did *only because* he was unable to do otherwise, or *only because* he had to do it. And we understand him to mean, more particularly, that when he did what he did it was not because that was what he really wanted to do (838).

Consequently, Frankfurt argues, we cannot legitimately adopt anything of the form expressed by PAP⁶, but must substitute, instead, a principle which says that a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done term 'because' is to be understood. As I use the term, to say that someone acted as he did *because* he could not have done otherwise means that (a) the person in question could not have done otherwise, and (b) the factors that made it true that he could not have done otherwise were actually those which brought his action about and hence which are sufficient to explain it.

otherwise. From the context it appears that he means by this that a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it because he could not have done otherwise, unless it is also the case that he did it because he really wanted to.⁶ And, it is not difficult to show that the principle does not conflict with the view that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism. For, even if determinism implies that a man always acts as he does because he cannot do otherwise, it clearly does not imply that he always acts as he does only because he cannot do otherwise.

The trouble with Frankfurt's reply is that it simply asserts that if a man's desire to act as he did was part of the explanation of his behavior, then the fact that he could not have done otherwise fails in itself to exclude moral responsibility. But a typical hard-determinist contention has always been that if all events are strictly determined, then a man bears no moral responsibility for his actions *even if he was doing as he wanted and even if his desires figured into the explanation of his behavior*. They have believed (to cast the matter into Frankfurt's language) that if it is reasonable to exempt a man from moral responsibility who acted as he did only because he could not have done otherwise, it is equally reasonable to exempt him from responsibility if he acted as he did because he could not have done otherwise. And it has seemed evident to them that that fact that the one man may have *wanted* to behave as he did is irrelevant to the question of his responsibility as long as his desires were themselves strictly determined. They have thought this, I believe, because of their conviction that if his desires were part of an unbroken chain of causation, then his having them was unavoidable. And how, they have wondered, can we justify thinking of one man as blameworthy but not another when the only difference between them is the presence of a factor (the desire) which was itself unavoidable? They would agree that we sometimes tend to draw a distinction with respect to moral responsibility between people whose desires were caused in one sort of way (e.g., by their own previous behavior) and those whose desires were caused in another way (e.g., by the behavior of a malicious or neglectful parent), but this may be because we have failed to reflect on, or

⁶ Frankfurt does not state whether factors other than a person's *really wanting* to act as he does are to be excluded by the phrase "only because". And, taken in itself, it is simply not clear what sorts of factors are to be excluded by this phrase. For example, does the principle leave room for the responsibility of persons who cannot do otherwise, but who act as they do out of a conviction that so acting would be morally right? I interpret his principle as I have above just because "really wanting" is the only condition he mentions explicitly.

take in the significance of, the fact that in neither case was the presence or absence of the desire avoidable. The question is not whether all or most of us in assessing moral responsibility behave as Frankfurt says we do, for the hard-determinist claim is just that such behavior would be irrational, lacking in an adequate justification.

Now I do not claim to know whether these hard-determinist arguments are sound. But the crucial point is that there can be no conclusive reason for supposing that we must abandon PAP in favor of Frankfurt's alternative principle, rather than merely substituting PAP, apart from the support of some additional argument which shows what is faulty about the sorts of considerations I have just mentioned. Anyone who was impressed by these considerations, as many have been, would feel, correctly, that Frankfurt has merely assumed the critical point at issue.

If I am correct so far, Frankfurt has begged the question in the dispute with the hard determinist. But this should not lead one to believe that he has simply assumed the truth of some traditional soft-determinist view. For in arguing against the possibility of revising PAP he has assumed something that would be denied by soft determinists as well. In particular he has taken it that it might be legitimate to think of a man who was doing as he wanted as morally blameworthy even if it were granted that he acted as he did because he could not have done otherwise. But even soft determinists have felt that, if a man acted as he did because he could not have done otherwise, he could not bear moral responsibility for his action. On the whole, they have tried to show that, even if his actions were determined, there would be some circumstances under which he could still be said to have been able to do otherwise. But while soft determinists have not been unanimous in their account of these circumstances, the majority by far have felt it necessary to show that at least under the favored circumstances the man could have done otherwise if they were to save the case for responsibility. Few have been prepared to accept the thesis that a man may be morally responsible even if he behaved as he did because he could not do otherwise. But this is just the thesis that one would have to accept if one were to agree with Frankfurt's contention that his alternative principle must be adopted rather than PAP'. So, even if hard and soft determinists alike were to accept Frankfurt's counterexample to PAP, there is no reason to suppose that either would find his alternative principle intuitively acceptable. In fact, I think it is clear that they would find PAP' acceptable and Frank-

furt's alternative principle unacceptable. For PAP' skirts the counterexample and preserves the original intuitions behind PAP—which was the common property of both camps in the compatibility dispute.⁶

Now it may be that both parties to the dispute would be wrong to accept PAP', just as they were wrong to accept PAP. But in the light of what I have said, we may suppose that very strong support would have to be produced for this view before anyone could suppose that it had been proved. Frankfurt, however, offers very little to show that a man who acted as he did because he could not do otherwise, but who also acted as he did because he really wanted to, can bear moral responsibility for his action. The only support he gives is to charge that we do think of such people as responsible. But it is obvious that many of us do not, and in any case what we need to know here is not what we do think, but what we would be justified in thinking.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Form and Style in the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetic Morphology. THOMAS MUNRO. Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University in collaboration with The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1970. 467 p. \$17.50.

This monumental work—some 1,000 pages in a normal format—is the first fruit of Professor Munro's retirement as professor of art of Case Western Reserve University and as curator of education of The Cleveland Museum of Art. The work is didactic in tone and an outgrowth of Munro's courses of comparative aesthetics, and realizes his favorite idea of a morphology of art. In its original Goethean shape, morphology was a branch of biology with a connotation of "Naturphilosophie." Within Munro's meaning it is an

⁶This issue can be put into a slightly different light by noting that the falsity of PAP' entails the falsity of PAP. (This is evident from the fact that PAP specifies that a certain condition is sufficient for exempting a man from responsibility, and PAP' merely states that that same condition when taken together with another is sufficient.) It follows that any argument capable of refuting PAP' must be capable of refuting PAP. But if the remarks put forth against PAP' (in the quote) had been offered as an adequate objection to PAP (without the credibility of PAP having first been weakened by Frankfurt's counterexample) I think their inconclusiveness would have been much more evident.