



# Frankfurt's Theory of Free Will & Alternative Possibilities

Terrance Lynn  
Philosophy 140  
Stephen Griffith  
Fall 2009

Harry G. Frankfurt is an accomplished philosopher who has studied the problem of free will. He is known as a Traditional Compatibilist because he believes that people have free will only if they are not forced and their actions have been "willed" by them alone. Frankfurt's Principle of Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility states that, "A person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise" (Frankfurt 159). Frankfurt also states that, "Practically no one, however, seems inclined to deny or even to question that the principle of alternate possibilities (constructed in some way or other) is true" (159). Frankfurt later states an interesting phrase that is counter to his argument, which is known as the Frankfurt Counterexample.

In his essay, Frankfurt makes the point similar to the effect that X could kidnap B but does not because of condition Y making him avoid B. Also, X may not want to kidnap B but is forced by Y to kidnap B. Would it be impossible for X to do otherwise in either of these situations? Well, yes, it would be impossible

for X to do otherwise depending on the situation X is put in. Say X (a wholly innocent bystander) is sitting on a park bench, and Y sits next to X. Y then threatens that if X does not kidnap B and sadistically torture B, Y will kill X and eat X's remains. Does X really have any choice to do otherwise in this situation? No, X does not have any other choice, and Frankfurt would agree due to the conditions that were forced upon X by Y. Frankfurt would also claim that Y forcing X to do something did not physically move him to kidnap and torture B, but it brought X to do what Y wanted X to do. Frankfurt states, "A person may do something in circumstances that leave [him] no alternative to doing it, without these circumstances actually moving him or leading him to do it—without them playing any role, indeed, in bringing it about that he does what he does" (160). X had no alternative (not counting death as an alternative) to kidnapping and torturing B; therefore, X was brought about to do what Y wanted without Y physically bringing about X's actions.

Frankfurt also makes a second point:

sometimes a person who is coerced into doing an action is morally responsible for such action. He states that, "It is natural enough to say of a person who has been coerced to do something that he could not have done otherwise" (160). Frankfurt makes the point that a person who is unable to do otherwise should sometimes still be morally responsible for his actions even though he had no other alternative. I firmly believe, even in my example of X, that one does not bear moral responsibility because one does not have the ability to do otherwise. However, bearing no moral responsibility would leave an absence, allowing for X to do the same action again if not in the same harsh situation. There is also the possibility that X was uncaring for what would happen next if he went through with what Y wanted. Therefore, X could be morally responsible in that situation.

Another point in Frankfurt's essay is that if X honestly and seriously intended to do what Y wanted him to do regardless, he still would be responsible even though he could not have done otherwise. Suppose X had already decided to do an action before he was coerced by Y to do the same action. This would not allow coercion to excuse moral responsibility because X had an alternative and chose on his own to do an action. Therefore there was free will involved in the decision that X had made. Frankfurt makes a point similar to the effect that if X were to be excused from committing a crime, it was not because there was no alternative. This is a very important concept in itself, because one cannot be excused just because one was coerced into doing an action. Again, if we look at the case of X, we can excuse him for his actions, but not because of the power of Y's coercion. X will

not bear the full moral responsibility as if he were to do it on his own, but he will bear some moral responsibility, and Y will bear the rest.

In my example of X, there was an alternative possibility that X could have clearly chosen, although it is unfavorable to the reasonable person. This alternative possibility was death, and X could have chosen this in order to spare B's life, and X would have remained wholly innocent. Although this is counterexample to having no alternative possibility, it can prove that alternative possibilities are false because no one would favor death as an alternative. X can also be morally responsible if he were to choose death because he knew that Y wanted B to be kidnapped and tortured, allowing Y and X to share responsibility. It is clear that it is nearly impossible to escape moral responsibility even if one is coerced, because one is not excused due to coercion.

In Frankfurt's conclusion he states that, "The principle of alternate possibilities should thus be replaced, in my opinion, by the following principle: a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise" (167). Even if death is excluded as an alternative, X can be morally responsible because his only option was to do it and not because he wanted to kidnap and torture B--thus allowing X to bear some moral responsibility for the actions that Y forced him into doing. Frankfurt also points out that,

The following may all be true: there were circumstances that made it impossible for a person to avoid doing something; these circumstances actually played a role in bringing it about that he did it, so that it is correct to say that

he did it because he could not have done otherwise; the person really wanted to do what he did; he did it because it was what he really wanted to do, so that it is not correct to say that he did what he did only because he could not have done otherwise. Under these conditions, the person may well be morally responsible for what he has done. On the other hand, he will not be morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise, even if what he did was something he really wanted to do. (168)

I find it extremely hard to accept Frankfurt's idea of excusing a person but not excusing him for being unable to have done otherwise. I believe that if one is coerced into committing a crime, one always should be excused because one has no other alternative. But it depends on the situation that is occurring. I think this is appropriate and follows a determinist's view on the situation because of the following reasons:

1. X was coerced by Y to commit a crime.
2. X will be excused because he was unable to have done otherwise.
3. Therefore, any crime that X does will be excused (if he is unable to do otherwise).

This is a logically valid argument and a deterministic view because X will always be excused if he is coerced into doing something. Although Frankfurt would disagree with excusing X because he was coerced, there is no other reason to excuse him other than the circumstance of coercion and his inability to

have done otherwise. If one were to say X was excused because he could not have done otherwise, it is the same as excusing X for being coerced into doing something. On the other hand, we could have a situation that has both free will and determinism, which can show that they are compatible. We could say the following situation could occur: *X is coerced by Y to break into the White House and kill the President. Y, who knows everything about people, will not act upon X unless he does not go through with Y's plot to kill the President. X decides to get in his car, go to the Central Intelligence Agency, and attempt to alert the Secret Service of Y's plot to kill the President. Before X can get to the building that houses the Central Intelligence Agency and the Secret Service, Y stops X in the parking lot. Y then proceeds to persuade X to carry through Y's plot against the President.*

In this situation, it is very clear that X had free will and acted against Y. Ultimately, Y could have succeeded with his plot against the President. Y was determined to have X do this dirty deed, and X had free will not to do this dirty deed. How can determinism and free will be incompatible in this case? Clearly, X had free will and Y was determined to have X carry out this plot against the President. I think that it depends on the situation, in which there can be incompatibilism. In the above scenario, I think it is true that X had free will because X did what he wanted to do. I also think that it is true that Y was Determined to have X carry out his plot against the President. Therefore, I believe that both free will and determinism are compatible with each other in certain cases but not in others.

I believe in both determinism and free will, which would make me a Soft Determinist.

Overall, I would support Frankfurt's philosophy on free will and determinism because it complements my thinking about determinism and free will. I had free will to make the paper six pages long, but it was determined that I needed to write a paper for this class. Also, it is determined that I will get a grade on this paper if I willingly submit it to the professor. This is another example of my belief in free will and determinism and their compatibility with each other.

## Bibliography

- Frankfurt, Harry G. "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility." *Readings on the Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*. Ed. Nils Ch. Rauhut and Renee J. Smith. 2nd ed. New York: Longman, 2007. 159-68. Print.
- Rauhut, Nils Ch. "The Problem of Free Will." *Ultimate Questions: Thinking About Philosophy*. 2nd ed. New York: Longman, 2006. 84-112. Print.

*\*Title art by Cristi Beeler*

