

Frankfurt-style Counterexamples and Unperformed Actions

The Principle of Possible Action

(PAP) and Frankfurt: A Review

- Many have the intuition that moral responsibility and the ability to do otherwise are somehow tied together.
 - Intuitively, if I am morally responsible for my actions, then I have free will with respect to those actions.
- Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP):
 - A person, S, is morally responsible for what S has done only if S could have done otherwise.

- The Case of Jones4 and Black.

Frankfurt's Conclusion

- So, it seems that Frankfurt's Jones⁴ case is a **counterexample** to PAP:

Jones is morally responsible, but he couldn't have done otherwise.

Acts, performed and unperformed

- (PAP), and Frankfurt's purported counterexample to it, are about *performed acts*.
 - The performed act in question: Jones⁴'s shooting and killing of the mayor.
 - The question: is Jones⁴ morally responsible for the shooting and killing of the mayor, despite the fact that he couldn't have failed to perform that very act?
 - Frankfurt: Yes, he is.

- But what about *unperformed acts*? Can a morally responsible agent be held responsible for *failing* to perform a given action?
- Recall our definition of *morally responsible agent*:
 - A person who is a *morally responsible agent* is
 - (i) capable of performing actions that are morally *right* and actions that are morally *wrong*, and
 - (ii) may be the subject of moral *praise* or *blame* for her actions

The Principle of Possible Action

- (PPA): A person is morally responsible for failing to perform a given act only if he or she could have performed that act.
- (PPA) states that it is a necessary condition on being morally responsible for failing to perform a given action only if he or she could have performed it.

Can we construct a Frankfurt-style counterexample to the (PPA)?

- van Inwagen: Such a putative counterexample would have to take the following form:
 - An agent S is deliberating about whether or not to perform an action a . S decides not to perform a , and as a result of his decision fails to perform a . But unknown to S , there was a certain factor (or factors) that would have prevented him from performing a had S decided to perform a .
 - These factors would have come into play had S shown any inclination to perform a , or even had S been inclined towards deciding to perform a .

- But, since S decided to refrain from performing *a* and failed to perform *a* for that reason, those factors played no role in his failure to perform *a*, or his decision not to perform *a*.

van Inwagen's Example

- The case of the victim, Peter, and the telephone exchange.

- Question: Is Peter morally responsible for failing to call the police?

- van Inwagen: Of course Peter is not responsible for failing to call the police – how could he have successfully done so?
- Peter may be morally responsible for failing to try, for being a coward, for being lazy, or selfish, or