

Harry Frankfurt

October 21st

Central claims

- The principle of alternate possibilities → states a necessary condition on moral responsibility
 - ↳ Suppose: Agent X performs action A in circumstance C
 - ↳ What makes it the case that X is morally responsible for A → why is someone subject to moral evaluation?
- **moral responsibility**: we can choose to do one thing over another
- **determinism**: every event or occurrence in the world is necessitated by antecedent conditions in conjunction w/ laws of nature → includes human choice, action, behavior, etc.
 - ↳ If this is true, we aren't morally responsible for what we do because it is physically determined
- Frankfurt argues the truth of determinism is irrelevant to responsibility → a person is morally responsible for their actions, but the person could not have done otherwise
- **Four Jones cases**
 - Jones decided for his own reasons to do some action X. Then someone threatens him to do that same action X. Jones completes X
 - 1) **Jones₁: idle coercion** → Jones₁ is strong personality and chooses to complete the action regardless of the threat
 - ↳ he is responsible for his action → the fact that he was threatened does not reduce the moral responsibility he would otherwise bear for his act
 - 2) **Jones₂: coercion** → very sensitive and completely forgets his original decision, but completes the same action out of fear of the threat
 - ↳ Jones₂ is not responsible for his action
 - 3) **Jones₃: over-determination** → acknowledges that the threat didn't lead him to act (because he already wanted to perform action X), the threat would have made him act (if he didn't want to anyway)
 - ↳ Jones₃ is responsible for his action because the threat didn't influence his decision
 - 4) **Jones₄: idle manipulation** → someone is able to manipulate his mind w/out him knowing and wanted to make Jones complete X, but Jones was already doing it anyway:

↳ Jones₄ is morally responsible for his actions, but he could not have done otherwise

→ Frankfurt proves that the principle of alternate possibilities (rational or casual) is wrong

Revision

* Original: responsible for what she has done only if she could have done otherwise

↳ Revision 1: a person is not morally responsible for what she has done because she couldn't have chosen otherwise

→ implies that determinism + moral responsibility are incompatible

↳ Revision 2: a person is not morally responsible for what she has done only because she couldn't have chosen otherwise

→ compatible with determinism → the truth of determinism is irrelevant

* Frankfurt accepts revision 2: we are responsible for what we do when we willingly choose to do it

Book Notes

* A person is morally responsible for what they did only if she could have done otherwise