

**Frankfurt Examples: A Step toward Compatibilism?**

**Michael Durant**

**Grand Valley State University**

Perhaps one of the most controversial philosophical theories is compatibilism, the idea that human beings are responsible for their actions even if their actions are causally determined. This goes against a few of our more common intuitions about responsibility, in particular that we must be able to choose from a variety of genuinely open alternatives in order to be held responsible for an action which Harry Frankfurt called the *Principle of Alternate Possibilities* or PAP.<sup>1</sup> Many compatibilist answers have been offered to address or dismiss this intuition including Frankfurt's who claims to have a counterexample that shows that we may intuitively grant an agent moral responsibility even for an action lacking alternatives. The legitimacy of his example has been questioned, however, on the basis that it fails to meet its own criterion of elimination of alternatives. This is known as the *Flickers of Freedom Defense* and has generated many attempts to salvage Frankfurt's attempt as a viable counterexample. I will look specifically at one which we may call the 'robustness response' for it defends Frankfurt's counterexample on the basis that any alternatives which remain are not robust, that is, irrelevant to the issue of moral responsibility. I think the robustness response sets the positive and negative goals of Frankfurt cases in sharp contrast, thereby clarifying their overall effectiveness. I argue that whether we think the robustness response helps the original counterexample depends on which of these goals we have in mind, and that the positive sweep of the argument in support of compatibilism is where it falls short.

---

<sup>1</sup> Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (Dec. 4, 1969): 829.

---

*Frankfurt Examples: A Step toward Compatibilism?*

---

I will begin with some terms. A useful explanation of determinism, first of all, is Peter van Inwagen's who starts from the idea of a "conjunction" of propositions describing "the state of the world ... with the laws of physics."<sup>2</sup> Thus, if we fully describe the state of the world at a given time, including all events which occur at that time, and apply the laws of physics to that state, then the full description of its next state and subsequent states will be deducible. Determinism is 'located' in the assumption that only one result can flow from a given state of affairs given the laws of nature.<sup>3</sup> By contrast indeterminism claims that, given the exact same state of the world at a particular time, there can be several equally possible outcomes even with the same laws.

The compatibilist claims that human beings may be responsible in a deterministic world while the incompatibilist claims that determinism rules out certain necessary conditions for moral responsibility such as alternate possibilities. Another condition which the incompatibilist may require for moral responsibility is that the 'source' of the agent's action come ultimately from the agent him/herself, a view known as *source incompatibilism*.<sup>4</sup> Though not directly dealt with by the Frankfurt counterexample, this second incompatibilist condition has become important to the debate and I will discuss it later on.

Lastly, PAP can be specified in various ways. But starting off it may be understood simply as the requirement of alternatives in general for moral responsibility. I believe this was Frankfurt's original intention when he coined the term. Since he introduced the term, more fine-tuned definitions have emerged as we will see.

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter van Inwagen, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism," *Philosophical Studies* 27, no. 3 (1975): 186.

<sup>3</sup>I do not think van Inwagen's reference to laws of *physics* need be taken with an explicitly naturalistic connotation. At least we may stipulate that, whatever the world is and whatever principles apply to it, determinism establishes a relationship of entailment between the two. This is a definition of determinism one may hold regardless of ontological concerns.

<sup>4</sup>Tina Talsma, "Source Incompatibilism and the Foreknowledge Dilemma," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2013): 210.

***I. The counterexample, objections, and counter objections***

Frankfurt-type counterexamples run something like this: Ingrid and Ida are coworkers at a brewery. Because of Ida's subtle falsification of information Ingrid has been put in a bad light and turned down for a promotion while Ida has been chosen instead. While Ingrid has plans to turn in evidence of Ida's misconduct to upper management, she is unsure whether or not to take this step as the evidence is not conclusive and it might end up looking like foul play on her part rather than Ida's, further preventing her from receiving a promotion. This is when Ingrid's husband Bill decides to help the situation. Motivated by the cases of free beer which would come with a higher position for his wife, Bill takes the step of buying a little-known device which allows him to monitor Ingrid's decision-making process and to send a neurological signal which would cause her to decide one way should he choose to step in. Thus, as Ingrid approaches her boss with the evidence, deliberating right up to the last moment, Bill monitors her thoughts until she decides to go through with it. As she decides on her own Bill never actually uses the option of neurological manipulation available to him, having moral qualms about such a step unless absolutely necessary. The documentation convinces Ingrid's boss, she is promoted after Ida's dismissal and Bill ends up happily enjoying more craft beer than he ever imagined.

We are intended to recognize that Ingrid is without alternatives when she speaks up. For as Bill has the power to make her do so anyway, it seems she has no way to avoid it. Either she will speak up of her own accord or Bill will make her do it. In both cases she speaks up with (presumably) the same outcome. Since the actual course of events involves her own action, we are also meant to intuit that she is responsible for what takes place and thus deserves the credit for overcoming her own doubts and taking initiative. For as there was no actual interference she proceeded entirely on her own power, as opposed to what

---

*Frankfurt Examples: A Step toward Compatibilism?*

---

would occur in the counterfactual scenario of Bill's manipulation. Frankfurt and others have offered many such hypothetical cases to disprove the necessity of alternatives for moral responsibility. It is worth noting that the example's outlandish or fictitious nature has nothing to do with its success or failure as it is merely intended to evoke intuitions which contradict PAP.

However, there is a problem with this initial formulation of the example. The idea that Bill could really tell from Ingrid's neurological patterns what she was about to decide is suspect as it seems to presuppose determinism. Why, in other words, should we accept that her mental state just prior to her decision could give Bill a certain indicator of what she would decide the next instant? This arguably begs the question against the incompatibilist who could claim that Ingrid is not responsible as soon as a deterministic relation obtains. And while the counterexample is meant to lead the incompatibilist to give up their position, there are several reasons why determinism is thought to be incompatible with moral responsibility, as noted above. Therefore, a counterexample to any one of these principles (such as PAP) must isolate that aspect of determinism without confusing our intuitions by the presence of others.

One way compatibilists have attempted this is by the removal of signs of anything which gives certain indication of the decision prior to its being made. When the example is modified in this way, it becomes a matter largely of restricting the time-frame of the decision and the counterfactual interference. Hence, if Bill has decided that he will activate the neurological pathway causing Ingrid to make the decision at precisely twelve o'clock, but Ingrid decides on her own the instant before, then it seems she still could not have done otherwise as a moment's longer hesitation would have resulted in her decision making process being coerced by Bill. Or one may take an approach described by Michael Robinson and stipulate that Ingrid's decision and Bill's interference occur at precisely the same time but Bill's action is "preempted" and Ingrid's

---

*Frankfurt Examples: A Step toward Compatibilism?*

---

action still takes place on her own power.<sup>5</sup> Either way, the purpose is to establish that Bill's presence eliminates alternatives without playing any actual causal role in bringing about Ingrid's action, and to do this without the use of a deterministic prior sign of Ingrid's decision.

It is here that a major criticism is raised for even if we grant the plausibility of such a fine adjustment of the occurrence of Bill's and Ingrid's actions thus making it impossible for her to do otherwise than speak to her boss, many have commented that she still seems in possession of certain alternatives. If it remains undetermined what she will decide on her own (as it must to avoid question begging), then regardless of whether she can do otherwise, it seems open that she can still choose otherwise. This is known as the *flickers of freedom defense* for it seems that, however slight they may be, alternatives are still available to agents in such cases. In other words Ingrid could decide on her own to take initiative or to force Bill's hand so that she acts by his hand.

It may be responded, however, that these alternatives are not relevant to the purpose of the counterexample, that they are not of the appropriate sort relating to moral responsibility (i.e. not robust). This is a common approach taken, for example, by John Martin Fischer, who argues that these flickers ought to "play a certain role in the appropriate understanding of the cases."<sup>6</sup> The robustness response boils down to a claim that, if we are to ground moral responsibility on the possession of alternatives, then it ought to be demonstrated how such alternatives actually contribute to moral responsibility. Fischer argues that we claim an agent is not responsible because of lack of alternatives, then it should be clear how the presence of alternatives makes a difference.<sup>7</sup>

But this is just what the robustness responder denies, claiming that the

---

<sup>5</sup>Michael Robinson, "Modified Frankfurt-type Counterexamples and Flickers of Freedom," *Philosophical Studies* 157, no. 2 (2012): 181.

<sup>6</sup>John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 140.

<sup>7</sup>*ibid.*, 141.

---

*Frankfurt Examples: A Step toward Compatibilism?*

---

kinds of alternatives which remain are not acceptable even on the incompatibilist's terms. In the case of Ingrid and Bill we must specify that she is completely unaware of her husband's involvement, and thus his presence has no influence whatsoever on her deliberation. Therefore, if she happens to wait that one instant longer and his device is allowed to take over, then she will act on his power and bear no responsibility for the action. But it appears in this case that her hesitation of but one fateful second more is the result of "luck,"<sup>8</sup> something to which we should be reluctant to ascribe moral responsibility.<sup>9</sup> To be clear, the reason why she intuitively lacks responsibility if Bill steps in has to do with his providing the impetus (i.e. source) for the action, thus appealing to the *source incompatibilist* intuition mentioned earlier. Thus one can argue that while her counterfactual hesitation results in lack of moral responsibility because the force behind the action is not her own, her actual non-hesitation cannot conversely be used to ground responsibility since it is a matter of luck.

This, then, is the crux of the issue for the robustness responder: Frankfurt cases may be appropriately limited to only alternatives that are plausible grounds for moral responsibility of the agent which rule out alternatives that are irrelevant to moral responsibility; irrelevant alternatives should not be acceptable to the incompatibilist as they involve 'luck' or something otherwise outside the agent's control.<sup>10</sup> The robustness responder can claim the incompatibilist cannot use these to make points about moral choice; whatever other significance they may have, they are of no use to the incompatibilist.

---

<sup>8</sup>Robert Francis Allen, "Robust Alternatives and Responsibility," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2004): 25.

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of luck from a libertarian point of view, see Robert Kane, "Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Determinism," *Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 5 (May 1999).

<sup>10</sup>Robert Francis Allen, "Robust Alternatives and Responsibility," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2004): 26.

*II. Clarifying the robustness response*

As I see it, Frankfurt examples have a negative goal as well as a positive goal. The negative goal is to refute the incompatibilist intuition of PAP. But the compatibilist does not wish to stop there, the refutation of incompatibilism is merely one step on the way to arguing positively for compatibilism. The robustness response then must be evaluated according to these two goals, and I believe that it gives differing results for each one, leading ultimately to a roadblock for the positive aim and perhaps even undermining the negative goal.

First of all, we must examine how well the Frankfurt examples meet the primary or negative goal of refuting PAP. The incompatibilist claims alternatives are necessary for moral responsibility but the robustness responder points out we need an explanation of how alternatives contribute to responsibility in the first place. As Fischer says, alternatives ought to “ground” responsibility, providing at least part of its basis.<sup>11</sup> It is not enough for the incompatibilists simply to point to whatever alternatives may be present and claim they bear out their intuitions about PAP. These alternatives may not even a basis for responsibility as the incompatibilist understands it. The intuition behind PAP requires a positive basis beyond mere existence of some alternatives or other.

This response seems solid thus far. The incompatibilist must show there are robust alternatives left in the Frankfurt cases that are relevant for responsibility and explain how they are relevant. This demand seems especially reasonable as the alternatives themselves seem dubious according to the incompatibilists' own principles. Thus the Frankfurt case with non-robust alternatives may be said to have eliminated all (morally relevant) alternatives and may make its negative claim against incompatibilism, showing that alternatives are not necessary for moral responsibility.

---

<sup>11</sup>John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 140.

---

*Frankfurt Examples: A Step toward Compatibilism?*

---

I believe we get less than satisfactory results however when we turn to the positive purpose of the robustness response. Suppose we grant that the negative goal has been accomplished and alternatives have been shown to be unnecessary for moral responsibility as commonly thought, we ought to be able to proceed to showing how moral responsibility is possible in a deterministic world which radically lacks alternatives. It remains up to the compatibilist to link the negative accomplishment of the Frankfurt case to a demonstration that responsibility can apply in a world which radically lacks alternatives. Otherwise all that's been accomplished is showing only that certain kinds of alternatives are unnecessary for responsibility (provided we grant that much). But if an explanation cannot be given of how responsibility is possible altogether without alternatives, then it may be argued that alternatives are still necessary for responsibility only fewer or different kinds than traditionally thought. And though the robustness responder may rightly demand that the incompatibilist must show how these alternatives contribute, yet the compatibilist also has an obligation to make a positive argument for their position. If neither can do so, then we may end up with a situation in which both compatibilism and traditional incompatibilism are disconfirmed.

This raises one more difficulty for the compatibilist. It may be that even the negative accomplishment of the Frankfurt example is undermined if it fails to reach its positive one. For these results may be viewed as merely putting pressure on the incompatibilist to revise the set of traditional alternatives required for responsibility. If the compatibilist cannot show how alternatives are absolutely unnecessary for intuitions of responsibility to hold, then it appears they still are necessary, albeit in a highly unconventional fashion. Even if the incompatibilist is uncomfortable with the need to shift the criteria under pressure from this counterexample, I believe the general drift of things is still in favor of incompatibilism.

In conclusion, the question whether moral responsibility truly is



---

*Frankfurt Examples: A Step toward Compatibilism?*

---

consistent with a deterministic world remains open as the Frankfurt cases together with the robustness response seem more effective as arguments against the incompatibilist than for the compatibilist. Perhaps Frankfurt's original intent was limited to the negative sweep of the argument; the intuition behind PAP is a fairly strong one and presented a formidable obstacle to compatibilism until Frankfurt's intervention. But if the argument is to be taken further, then I think it is time for another strategy to be devised, perhaps in tandem with Frankfurt cases, but going beyond their present limits.

Works Cited

- Allen, Robert Francis. "Robust Alternatives and Responsibility." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2004): 21-29.
- Fischer, John Martin. *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994.
- Frankfurt, Harry. "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility." *Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (Dec. 4, 1969): 829-839.
- Kane, Robert. "Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Determinism." *Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 5 (May, 1999): 217-240.
- Robinson, Michael. "Modified Frankfurt-type Counterexamples and Flickers of Freedom." *Philosophical Studies* 157, no. 2 (2012): 177-194.
- Talsma, Tina. "Source Incompatibilism and the Foreknowledge Dilemma." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2013): 209-219.
- van Inwagen, Peter. "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism." *Philosophical Studies* 27, no. 3 (1975): 185-199.