

Obligation, Responsibility and Alternate Possibilities

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Article:

Harry Frankfurt is well-known for his argument, in [1], against the Principle of Alternate Possibilities:

(PAP) A person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.

In [2], pp. 95-96, he argues that the rejection of (PAP) does not require rejection of the Kantian principle that 'ought' implies 'can':

(K) An agent S has a moral obligation to perform [not to perform] an act A only if it is within S's power to perform [not to perform] A.

(‘It is within S's power to perform A’ is here to be understood to mean the same as ‘S is free to do A’.) In [3], David Widerker argues that Frankfurt is mistaken, since (K) entails (PAP), or at least that part of (PAP) that deals with moral blame:

(PAP2)S is morally blameworthy for performing [not performing] A only if it is within S's power not to perform [to perform] A.

Widerker's argument is simple. He claims that (PAP2) follows from (K), given the following proposition, which he claims to be a necessary truth:

(B2) S is morally blameworthy for performing [not performing] A only if S has a moral obligation not to perform [to perform] A.

Of course, (PAP2) does follow from (K) conjoined with (B2). But (B2), far from being necessarily true, is false. I have argued against it in [4] (Chapter 3, Sections 3.1 and 3.6), on the basis, briefly, of the fact that moral responsibility is a function of what one believes about one's moral obligations and not of what one's moral obligations actually are. One is blameworthy for what one has done, even if one was justified in doing it, if one believed at the time that one was not justified in doing it. Thus blameworthiness does not entail wrongdoing, and to justify an action is not to exculpate its agent. (Failure to recognize this fact too often prematurely terminates our moral inquiries.) It is also the case (although this is not strictly germane to the present discussion) that wrongdoing does not entail blameworthiness; this is widely accepted. Wrongdoing and blameworthiness are thus logically independent of one another (though not conceptually so; the latter is to be analysed in terms of the former), and Widerker's argument against Frankfurt fails.

It could, of course, still be that Widerker's conclusion is true. But I believe otherwise. I think that (PAP2) is false but that (K) is true. The reason is this. (PAP2) is a contraction of two other principles:

(BF) S is morally blameworthy for performing [not performing] A only if it is (or was) within S's power to perform [not to perform] A;

(FAP) It is within S's power to perform [not to perform] A only if it is within S's power not to perform [to perform] A.

What Frankfurt's argument against (PAP2) shows is that (FAP) is false; (BF) is left untouched. (I have argued for this in [4], Chapter 4, Section 4.10.) In other words, Frankfurt has not severed the link between moral responsibility and freedom, a link that, I believe, holds of conceptual necessity. In this regard, the concept of moral blameworthiness is just like many other fundamental moral concepts. In particular, all of the following seem true:

(PF) S is morally praiseworthy for performing [not performing] A only if it is within S's power to perform [not to perform] A;

(OF) [= (K)] S has a moral obligation to perform [not to perform] A only if it is within S's power to perform [not to perform] A;

(WF) It is morally wrong for S to perform [not to perform] A only if it is within S's power to perform [not to perform] A.

These principles do not themselves directly concern alternate possibilities. But when we note that

(OW) S has a moral obligation to perform [not to perform] A if and only if it is morally wrong for S not to perform [to perform] A,

we can immediately derive these two principles:

(OAP) S has a moral obligation to perform [not to perform] A only if it is within S's power not to perform [to perform] A;

(WAP) It is morally wrong for S to perform [not to perform] A only if it is within S's power not to perform [to perform] A.

Thus the link between obligation and alternate possibilities is preserved by an appeal to (OW), not (FAP), and this leaves room for the cogency of Frankfurt-type cases against the link between responsibility and alternate possibilities. (Note that there is no acceptable responsibility-analogue to (OW). In particular, it is clearly not the case that

(PB) S is morally praiseworthy for performing [not performing] A if and only if S is morally blameworthy for not performing [performing] A.)

It might be thought that I have begged the question against Widerker by assuming (K) [= (OF)] without argument. But this would be a mistake. The question that Widerker raises is not whether (K) is true, or whether (PAP) is true. The question is whether (K) entails (PAP). He argues that it does not. My strategy has been this: first, to object to a premiss in his argument, but not on the basis that his conclusion is false (that would be begging the question); second, to argue that Widerker's conclusion is in fact false. This argument assumes that (K) is true and, in calling attention both to a certain similarity between the concepts of obligation and responsibility (both (OF) and (BF) are affirmed) and to a certain dissimilarity between them ((OW) is affirmed but (PB) rejected), it seeks to explain how it is that (PAP) can nonetheless, for the reasons that Frankfurt gives, be false.

References

Harry G. Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969) 829-39.
Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
David Widerker, 'Frankfurt on "Ought Implies Can" and Alternative Possibilities', *Analysis* 51 (1991) 222-4.
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