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# The Application of the "Revised Principle of Alternate Possibilities" in a Causality Determined Universe.

Nicholas Michaud

According to Henry J. Frankfurt, the claim that "ought implies can" is taken by many philosophers as so foundational as to almost be considered an "a priori" truth. In his paper "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," Frankfurt challenges this assumption. He proposes the "revised principle of alternate possibilities," asserting that we intuitively absolve agents of moral responsibility *only if they act solely because they could not do otherwise*. Ten years later, John Martin Fischer challenges Frankfurt's claim, asserting that this cannot be the case if an agent exists within a universe governed by *actual sequence causation* and therefore, moral accountability and determinism remain non-reconcilable. These seemingly incompatible claims may be reconcilable after thorough analysis of intentionality. Even in the face of existence within a nominologically inevitable determinism, a kind of "Error Theory Compatibalism" is feasible.

There is a common ground upon which those who believe human beings have freewill and those who do not often meet. There is little contention between them that if agents do not have freewill, these same agents then cannot be held responsible for their actions. The specific reason for this is the belief that a moral agent can be held morally responsible for actions if and only if the agent could have done otherwise. Harry G. Frankfurt refers to this as "the principle of alternate possibilities." In his article *Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility* Frankfurt boldly asserts that "the principle of alternate possibilities is false."<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt

believes that he can provide examples of circumstances in which there are no alternate possibilities and the agent is still held morally responsible for the act. Twelve years later, in his article *Responsibility and control*, John Martin Fischer addresses Frankfurt's argument and contends that the incompatibilists--those who believe that determinism and responsibility are incompatible--may still agree that responsibility does not require control. Fischer asserts that Frankfurt's argument relies upon the premises that not only is responsibility separate from control (control in the sense that an agent has more than one option), but additionally that moral responsibility, if separated from control, is compatible with determinism. Fischer then argues that Frankfurt successfully proves that an agent can lack control and maintain moral responsibility, but he goes on to argue that moral responsibility is still incompatible with *causal* determinism.

It is generally taken for granted that determinism and moral responsibility are not compatible. It is assumed that for an agent to possess freedom of will, the agent must have more than one option from which to choose. To this Frankfurt replies "[t]here may be circumstances that constitute sufficient conditions for a certain action to be performed by someone and that therefore make it impossible for the person to do otherwise, but that do not actually impel the person to act or in any way produce his action."<sup>2</sup> Frankfurt's first example addresses the case of coercion. It is generally agreed upon that if an agent is coerced into doing something, that agent is not morally responsible for his or her behavior. Frankfurt's example follows the following form: let us say that Jones has been threatened with a harsh penalty by Black. Specifically, if Jones does not do as Black demands Black will kill him. In this case let us say that Black wants Jones to smack a different agent—Carl—on the back of the head. Ironically for Jones, (perhaps luckily)

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<sup>1</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 829.

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<sup>2</sup> Frankfurt, 830.

he had already decided that he really wanted to smack agent Carl's head, and furthermore, was about to do so when Black so rudely interrupted with his death threat. Frankfurt proposes that in order to determine if Jones is morally responsible, an understanding of the kind of person Jones is must be reached. If Jones has only one option, it seems counter-intuitive to absolve Jones of moral responsibility for smacking Carl on the back of the head if he was already planning to do so. It seems, then, that the principle of alternate possibilities is already weakening. The essential question is, then, "*why* did Jones smack Carl on the back of the head?" Frankfurt breaks down Jones' motivation in the following way: is Jones an unreasonable or a reasonable person? He asserts that if Jones is an unreasonable person he will either not care about the threat or be overwhelmed by it to a mind-numbing degree. Jones might be the kind of person who will do whatever he wants to do regardless of threats presented to him. If Jones is unconcerned about the threat and acts as if the threat is not present, then it cannot be said it was the threat that motivated him to act. Instead, it seems that Jones is responsible for his action because the threat has no effect on him. If, on the other hand, Jones is the kind of person who is overwhelmed by the slightest threat to his well-being, and would do anything necessary to preserve it, Jones might then not be held morally responsible for his action. If Jones was going to smack Carl on the back of the head, but when presented with the threat by agent Black completely forgets his original intention and does whatever agent Black wants, acting without any thought or consideration other than for that of his own welfare, he cannot be said to be motivated by his original intention. In this case of the unreasonable Jones, Jones is not held responsible for his action as he acted solely due to the threat made by agent Black. Frankfurt then considers the possibility of a reasonable Jones. If Jones neither ignores the threat, nor is terrified to the point of stupidity by it, Jones might still be held responsible for

his action. He has not forgotten, nor ignores, his original intention. If Black demands that he do other than Jones originally intended, Jones would--most reasonably--do as Black demands. As it is, Jones is quite happy that he gets to do what he originally wanted to do. Jones gladly smacks Carl on the back of the head. In this case, Jones seems to maintain responsibility for his action, though he lacks control. To quote Frankfurt: "It was not the threat that led him to act, though it would have done so if he had not already provided himself with a sufficient motive for performing the action in question."<sup>3</sup> If the principle of alternate possibilities is correct, regardless of Jones' motivation, he must not be held accountable for his action. This would be a difficult conclusion to reach while listening to Jones chuckle in the background, reveling in joy because he acted in the way that he did. It seems, instead, that in instances of coercion it is not the fact that the threatened agent has only one option that absolves the agent of moral responsibility, but because the agent acts solely due to coercion.

After exploring this situation and Jones' motivation, Frankfurt addresses the obvious counter-argument: although Jones is being coerced, and even if he is a reasonable man, he still retains the ability to do otherwise even though it would result in his immediate death. Frankfurt addresses this objection by altering his example in the following way: Black can manipulate Jones without Jones' knowledge. Specifics concerning the mechanism of this manipulation are unnecessary. All that needs to be known is that Black, without Jones' knowledge, can force Jones to do his will. As in the previous case, let us suppose that Black wants Jones to smack agent Carl on the back of the head. Unlike the previous case, Black would like to keep his involvement in this matter secret. So, by using his secret power of manipulation (whether scientific or psychic), Black will make sure that Jones smacks Carl on the back of the head. In order to minimize the possibility that his secret is revealed Black

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<sup>3</sup> Frankfurt, 832.

will only use his power in the case that Jones indicates in some way that he intends on doing other than Black desires. Perhaps Jones suffers from a serial smacking-people's-heads disorder, and whenever he decides to smack his next victim his left eyebrow raises. Conversely, every time he decided not to smack someone, his left eyebrow lowers. Watching carefully, Black notes a distinct raise in Jones' eyebrow and knows that Jones will now smack Carl on the back of the head. With this knowledge, Black rests easy knowing that he does not have to use his power to achieve his desired result. Jones, once again with great joy in his heart, smacks Carl on the back of the head, with no interference or involvement by Black. In this situation, Jones can follow only one possible path. He will, whether he decides to or not, smack Carl. It would seem, though, that if Jones decides to smack Carl, and does so without the involvement of Black, he should be held morally responsible for the action even though, regardless of his decision, he must smack Carl. Conversely, if Jones decides not to smack Carl but is then forced to by Black, it would seem necessary to absolve Jones of moral responsibility. In this way, Frankfurt means to demonstrate the error of the principle of alternate possibilities.

With examples similar to the preceding in mind, Frankfurt revises the principle of alternate possibilities. Frankfurt argues that an agent is morally absolved only when the agent acted solely due to external coercion. In essence, had Jones intended to not smack Carl, but was forced too, and the *only* reason he did so was because he was forced too, then--and only then--can it be said that he is not morally responsible. Frankfurt's revision of the principle states: "a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise."<sup>4</sup> Absolution, then, is not a result of the lack of alternate possibilities. Instead, absolution is granted as a result of the intention of the agent. Frankfurt's intuition also works in the reverse. It seems natural to

give praise to a child who has shared a toy with another child even with the knowledge that had the child decided not to share, we would have forced the child to share the toy. Moral praise is often given in situations where, upon reflection, the conclusion was inevitable but we believe the agent acted with the right motivation.

Fischer's argument attacks the actual deterministic quality of Frankfurt's examples. In true causal determinism it would seem that even an agent's intentions are not her own but instead a direct causal result of previous events. Fischer begins his article by restating Frankfurt's basic position. He then goes on to address Don Locke's criticism of Frankfurt. "Locke claims, essentially, that a contented slave is still a slave."<sup>5</sup> Fischer believes that if responsibility is associated with the agent's moral character Frankfurt can be defended from Locke's criticism. "On Frankfurt's account of responsibility, if the fact that a desire is irresistible plays a certain role in an agent's deliberation, the agent is not responsible. That is, if an agent believes that a desire is irresistible and if this belief is a part of his reason for acting on the desire, then the agent is not responsible for so acting."<sup>6</sup> If, on the other hand, the irresistibility of the desire or coercion plays no part in the agent's reason for action then the agent may be responsible. Fischer examines Locke's comparison of a willing and an unwilling drug addict. Locke claims that both, regardless of willingness, are still slaves. Fischer examines the motivations of the two addicts and concludes that while the willing addict is held responsible for taking the drug, the unwilling addict is not. The unwilling addict is not held responsible because the drug is not taken for any other reason than because it is irresistible. To hold the addict responsible for taking something that cannot be resisted seems counter-intuitive. If, instead, the addict takes the drug because the addict chooses to, it seems unreasonable to say that the willing addict is

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<sup>4</sup> Frankfurt, 838.

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<sup>5</sup> John Martin Fischer, "Responsibility and Control," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 27.

<sup>6</sup> Fischer, 28.

not responsible. The willing addict takes it because he or she wants to; similarly, a non-addicted person might take the drug only because he or she wants too. If the non-addict is responsible because the drug is taken willingly, in order to be consistent the willing addict should also be held responsible. Even as a slave to the drug, the willing addict takes the drug not because there is no other option, but because it is pleasing. The willing addict may not even be aware of the addictive nature of the drug. In this way, Locke's happy slave criticism seems to still leave us believing that if the happy slave is willingly doing the master's will the slave should be held morally responsible. Fischer contends that although Locke's argument lacks convincingness, two more arguments can be made in response to Frankfurt.

The next argument that Fischer addresses is that one might state that Frankfurt never successfully separates responsibility from control. Fischer states, "I call this the associationist strategy--the strategy that insists on the association of responsibility with control."<sup>7</sup> This argument is based on what Fischer calls the "essentialist principle." The essentialist principle states: two events are the same particular event if they have the same causal antecedents. There are two possible causes for the particular event: "Jones smacks Carl." As two events are different if they have different causes, the particular event of smacking Carl can be separated into two distinct events: one event forced by Black, the other chosen by Jones. Therefore, Frankfurt's argument is weakened by the fact that Jones, according to the essentialist principle, has two different possibilities from which to choose. Furthermore, according to the associationist principle, "a person is morally responsible for the obtaining of a state of affairs only if he could have prevented the obtaining of that state of affairs." From this one may conclude that Jones cannot be held responsible for the state of affairs that Carl is smacked on the back of the head because he could not have

prevented it happening. "[W]hy not also [hold him responsible] for something for which he is obviously not responsible: its being the case that he votes for Reagan on his own or  $2+2=4$ ?"<sup>8</sup> Then, according to the associationist principle and the essentialist principle, Jones cannot be held responsible for the particular event or for the universal state of affairs. Fischer argues that both the associationist claim and the essentialist principle are weak. The essentialist principle may be challenged. The assertion that the event of turning on the television would in actuality be two different events if one said "turn the television on" instead of "turn the TV on" seems implausible. Regardless of this, Fischer argues that without attacking the essentialist principle, the associationist argument may be criticized. Fischer states that the associationist "confuses the ability deliberately to do otherwise with the possibility of something different occurring."<sup>9</sup> Simply, the act of Jones being forced to smack Carl is one that lacks deliberateness on the part of Jones. Jones, in that instance, is not acting with rational control. Therefore, it is a case of something different occurring but not a case of an alternate choice available to Jones. Fischer then concludes that Jones, in this case, still does not have control of the situation; he has no choice concerning the inevitable conclusion of the event. Fischer believes that Frankfurt does effectively separate responsibility from control. Jones does lack control. Our intuitions tell us that he does not have any alternate possibilities. Nevertheless, we do find him responsible for his action. Fischer then goes on to attack the nature of Frankfurt's determinism.

Fischer breaks determinism down into two subdivisions. "There are two ways in which it might be true that one couldn't have done otherwise. In the first way, the actual sequence compels the agent to do what he does, so he couldn't have initiated an alternate sequence; in the second way, there is no actual-sequence compulsion; but the alternate

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<sup>7</sup> Fischer, 29.

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<sup>8</sup> Fischer, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Fischer, 32.

sequence would prevent the agent from doing other than he actually does.”<sup>10</sup> Fischer argues that Frankfurt’s situation is an example of the second kind. The alternate sequence prevents the agent from doing otherwise. In Frankfurt’s examples, it is the nature of the alternate sequence, and not compulsion to follow the actual sequence, that necessitates the inevitable conclusion. One might argue that the antecedent states of the world, in addition to causal laws, require that Jones will smack Carl. Nevertheless, Fischer states that the events in Frankfurt’s examples are not *nomologically* inevitable. Although the event “Jones smacks Carl” is inevitable, the events that result in it are not. For an event to be the result of actual sequence causation, all events leading up to it must be nomologically inevitable. If Jones smacks Carl, it is a result of Jones’ inclination to do so, which is the result of his serial-smacking-heads disorder, which is a result of his genetic make-up, and so on. In Frankfurt’s example there is only one end result, but there is no actual sequence causation. ““Black’s not intervening in Jones’s decision’ is a non-nomologically-inevitable component of the actual sequence (as is the state of affairs, ‘Jones’s deciding on his own to vote for Reagan.’)”<sup>11</sup> Fischer argues that what rules out responsibility is not lack of control, but instead actual sequence compulsion. Lack of control normally points to actual sequence compulsion, but it does not have to. “But when lack of control is not accompanied by actual-sequence compulsion, we need not rule out responsibility.”<sup>12</sup> Fischer argues that the fact that Frankfurt’s arguments do not involve actual sequence compulsion causes a distinct problem. Consider the following example (adapted from Carl Ginet): an agent, Dan, is devoutly religious. Now, it just so happens that Dan is about to take a test in his Metaphysics class. In order to take the test Dan must drive to school. Unfortunately for Dan, it has been raining heavily and he knows that between the traffic and the rain he

will never make it to class on time. Being devoutly religious, Dan believes that if he prays, God will intervene and stop the rain so that he can make it to his test on time. Dan decides to not pray to God to stop the rain because it would be a frivolous misuse of his relationship with God. In theory, science tells us that no matter what Dan does, it will continue to rain. Therefore, there is only one conclusion: regardless of his action, the rain will continue. According to Frankfurt: “a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise,” but in this case Dan does not withhold from praying because he only could not have done otherwise.<sup>13</sup> Dan withholds from praying because he believes it would be frivolous. Then, according to Frankfurt, we must hold Dan morally responsible for the event “Dan does not stop the rain by praying.” Fischer argues that the decision to hold Dan responsible is inconsistent with our intuitions of moral responsibility. Fischer believes that he can resolve the argument in the following way: “The actual sequence of events proceeds in such a way that the agent’s not stopping the rain is causally necessitated. Similarly, the physical laws that obtain (even in a libertarian world) are such that (given present technology) it is causally necessitated that no person can stop the Earth’s rotation. If we accept the claim that actual-sequence causal necessitation is incompatible with responsibility, we can explain why no agent is morally responsible for failing to stop the rain.”<sup>14</sup> If we hold agents responsible for events that are causally inevitable, we may hold them responsible for events that, in reality, they have no control over.

According to Fischer, Frankfurt does separate responsibility from control. One does not need options in order to be held responsible for one’s intentions. Regardless of this, Fischer also argues that Frankfurt’s argument does not actually address what philosophers usually mean when they say

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<sup>10</sup> Fischer, 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> Fischer, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Fischer, 38.

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<sup>13</sup> Frankfurt, 838.

<sup>14</sup> Fischer, 39.

“determinism.” Frankfurt’s examples do not involve actual sequence compulsion. Determinism, therefore, according to Fischer, is still incompatible with responsibility. Frankfurt has not demonstrated that a person can be held responsible for an action if the agent’s action is nomologically inevitable. The conclusion is, then, that when philosophers state that determinism means “it could not have been otherwise,” it implies that all events responsible for the event in question also could not have been otherwise. In this sense, even intentions are the result of previous causes. Frankfurt’s examples are not examples of determinism. Instead, they are examples in which a free agent lacks control of a situation. This does not account for determinism in its truest sense because every event that results in the conclusion is not causally necessitated. Fischer concludes that responsibility and determinism, in regards to Frankfurt’s examples, are still incompatible.

The essential question that must be raised in response to Fischer’s conclusion is “are our intentions our own?” Fischer has demonstrated the difficulties of attempting to break free from the constraints of actual sequence compulsion. If an agent is compelled in every way, for every action, to the point that even his intentions are not his own, it seems that holding the agent responsible would be gratuitous. If one answers, then, that “no, our intentions are not our own,” agents must be absolved of all moral responsibility. Even philosophers who believe that all actions inevitably result in one unavoidable conclusion might balk at the concept that their very thoughts do not belong to them. We believe, for the most part, that our intentions belong to us. Even if we do not get to act on them, our intuition tells us that we are responsible for our intentions. If causal determinism is correct, then even our intentions are simply the result of other events that precede them and we are responsible for nothing.

This belief, that our choices belong to us, has a significant impact on how we delegate moral responsibility. For example,

substantial evidence concerning how strongly intuitive it is to us to hold individuals responsible for their actions can be found in Fischer’s example concerning the rain. Although it might be correct that Dan is not responsible for the rain, what if he really--without even a singular doubt--believes he can make it rain? If, instead of a mild rainstorm that will prevent him from making it time to his test, what if he is presented with a situation in which the rain will result in someone else’s death? Consider a situation in which he has a friend who is severely allergic to water. Dan and his friend look up and see storm clouds rapidly approaching, and there is no shelter in sight. If Dan then decides to start praying *for* it to rain (and ironically it does rain) it seems likely that would ask him after the storm, “why did you try to make it rain?” Even if we are Atheists and believe there is no possible way Dan could have stopped the rain, if Dan’s answer was “I just knew it would be so much fun to watch my friend slowly and painfully die due to his allergy,” we might indignantly argue that Dan is a horrible person for *intending* his friend’s death. It is essential at this point that we recognize the fact that we hold Dan responsible, not only for his intentions, but for his action. We do not hold Dan responsible for the rain, yet we do hold him responsible for trying to bring about an event that we know he, in actuality, has no control over. The response to Fischer’s example concerning the rain is that Dan is not held responsible for the event that it rains but instead for the event “Dan tried to make it rain in order to kill his friend.” Through this we would be acting as if he is, in some way, responsible for his friend’s death. Although we know that he is not physically responsible for his friend’s death, if we know he truly believes in his power, we believe that he should not have tried to make it rain. In this way we may find someone responsible for actions that can in no way be prevented. Fischer’s criticism of Frankfurt using the original example of an individual responsible for the rain is incorrect because Frankfurt does not hold the agent responsible

for events beyond the agent's control, but instead holds the agent responsible for his or her intention in regard to any event, regardless of control. Frankfurt does accurately assess how we currently allocate moral responsibility. We do believe that our intentions are our own and allocate judgment in such a way that reflects that belief. Until it is proven otherwise, we will most likely continue to hold ourselves responsible for our actions in regard to those beliefs. This does not act as proof that our intentions are our own, only that we believe our intentions to be our own, and furthermore, we delegate moral responsibility based on them.

To act because there are no alternative possibilities can mean one of two things: 1) I know I have no options; therefore, I do this because I know I cannot do otherwise or 2) I cannot do or will to do otherwise regardless of whether I know I have no options; therefore, I do this because I cannot do otherwise. In both of these situations there are no alternative possibilities, *and* the agent acts because there are no alternative possibilities. In both cases we intuitively absolve the agent of guilt. If casual determinism is the state of the universe, then all agents act because they cannot do otherwise and should not be held morally accountable. (This is not the agent's rationale. Nevertheless, whatever the agent's rationale is, it is due the fact that it cannot be otherwise causally.) If, on the other hand, our intuitions are correct and we can will to do otherwise, then we can be held accountable for our intentions when we do not act solely because we cannot do otherwise despite our intuitions. Here I must create a distinction that Frankfurt may not be willing to make. If agents are free to will despite causal determination--in situations where they have no other option--the agents, if they act because they know they cannot do otherwise, are not held responsible as Frankfurt contends. If, on the other hand, causal determination results in our intentions being that which they are, and we have no real control over them, all actions are actions that we commit because we could not have done

otherwise, and therefore, we are absolved of all moral responsibility in all cases. Frankfurt might balk at this and ask, "What about cases in which the agent shows unbridled joy due to the action committed?" The response is that even that "unbridled joy" is only a reaction that is a result of certain specific causes, the actor cannot conceive, in reality, of doing otherwise. In the case of actual sequence causation, Frankfurt's assertion that morality hinges upon "acting solely because one cannot do otherwise" can be interpreted to state that *casual* determinism is incompatible with responsibility. Simply, the statement "acting solely because" assumes that the agent is capable of intending otherwise. If the agent cannot intend otherwise, Fischer is correct, the agent cannot be held morally accountable. With this division in mind it might well be the case the Fischer is incorrect when he states that Frankfurt successfully separates responsibility from control. If it is the agent's intention that absolves him—assuming his intentions are his own—then there is the tacit assumption that the agent has *control* of those intentions. Because of this, we cannot be certain that Frankfurt actually separates responsibility from control; instead, he may only be establishing that we hold agents responsible for actions only when they intend the actions

Actual sequence determinism tells us that whatever we choose to believe, we have no choice. It may well be the case that the intuition that we are free to intend as we choose is delusional. We cannot believe otherwise, though, because causation dictates that we believe as we do. Reason, if actual sequence determinism is the case, indicates that we are not free in any sense; even our intentions are not our own. Regardless, even if we believe we do not have freewill, we will continue to act as if we do have freewill. Ironically enough, this is also something that we, in reality, have no control over. Those few of us who do act as if they are not accountable will continue to be labeled "psychopath" and placed in various kinds of institutions for the protection of society. We



live in a delusion, but a persistent and pervasive one. This delusional existence requires a way to assign moral judgment within it. Frankfurt's revised principle of alternate possibilities is the most effective means of assigning judgment within the delusion. As opposed to throwing the theory out in the face of causal determinacy, we may use the principle within the realm of our delusion. With this in mind I argue for what might be called "Error Theory Compatibilism." We are in error concerning our belief that we are free. We are not free, and we are not morally responsible, and even if we believe this we are still bound by society and language; therefore, we believe--or at least as a society, act as if--we are free. This belief is compatible with Frankfurt's principle, though in reality it is not compatible with causal determinism.

Frankfurt challenges the principle of alternate possibilities by demonstrating situations in which agents are held responsible for actions even though they could not have done otherwise. It is the agent's intentions that determine his moral responsibility. Fischer asserts that Frankfurt does separate responsibility from control. Frankfurt's examples are not of actual sequence compulsion; due to this, Fischer argues that Frankfurt's examples do not apply to causal determinism. I have argued that Frankfurt's examples apply to actual sequence compulsion. Frankfurt's argument simply would state that in the case of actual sequence compulsion, the agent is absolved of moral responsibility. Furthermore, Fischer is incorrect; Frankfurt never actually separates responsibility from control because in Frankfurt's examples the agents still have control of their intentions. Finally, if causal determinism is the case we cannot be held responsible for our actions because we are in no way free, but we do not, for the most part, believe this. This belief--a result of causation--is compatible with moral judgment. As long as we hold this belief (which is inevitably left up to the sequence of causation) it is rational to use Frankfurt's revised principle of

alternate possibilities to allocate moral responsibility.

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