

15. Frankfurt 1988b, Compatibilism and second-order desires

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Frankfurt on *moral responsibility*: responsibility is not about the ability to do otherwise; rather, it requires being in the right mental state as you perform the action.

Frankfurt on *free will*: similar idea. Your will is free if you're in the right sort of mental state when you act—you *identify with* your action.

Definitions:

- You have many (often conflicting) desires. A desire is *effective* if it's what ultimately moves you to act—it's your *will*.
- A *first-order desire* is a desire about something other than what you presently desire.
- A *second-order desire* is a desire your present desires.
- A *volition* is a second-order desire that a first-order desire be *effective*, i.e. be your will.

Frankfurt makes three core claims.

1) Persons vs. things. What does it take for something to be a *person*? Consciousness? No. Means-ends rationality? No. Rather, it's *volitions*.

2) Alienation vs. identification. Some acts you identify with, others you are alienated from. (E.g. willing vs. unwilling addict.)

You identify with your act when it's consistent with your volitions.

3) Moral responsibility and freedom. When you identify with your act—i.e. when your act is consistent with your volitions—you are acting freely, and you are morally responsible.

Freedom of action = freedom to do what you want.

Freedom of will = freedom to *will* what you want.

This is a *compatibilist* theory of free will. Even if determinism is true (so that you couldn't act or will otherwise), when you identify with your action it is *your* action—so you act freely and are responsible for it.

Objection from below: Can we identify with our first-order desires, and be alienated from our second-order ones? Huckleberry Finn.

Objection from above: Can we identify with our *third-order* desires, and be alienated from our second-order ones? The lapsed Catholic.

E.g. deciding to plagiarize while (unknownst to you) your roommate sits behind you with a dread laser.

Compatible with determinism.

E.g. Snickers vs. spinach.

E.g. the desire to eat a Snickers.

You *want to want* the spinach.

Not all second-order desires are volitions. You might want to want the spinach, but to not act on that because you'll be seen as a health-freak.

In the morally significant sense, not the biological one. The characters in *The Fox and the Hound* are persons in this sense.

I.e. when your will (the desire that's effective) is what you want it to be.

I.e. the desire that's effective is one you want to be effective.

If you could've acted or willed otherwise, you wouldn't have!