

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP)

1. Compatibilism: Contrary to what the hard determinists argue, many philosophers believe that determinism IS compatible with free will. So, if it turns out that all of our actions are determined, and we can never do otherwise, we are still free, nevertheless.

Traditionally, the compatibilist holds something like the following belief. When asking whether or not you are freely doing X, we need only ask:

(1) Is X something that you WANT to do?

If the answer to (1) is Yes, then (according to the compatibilist) you are freely doing X. When asking whether or not you are free to do Y (some action that you haven't yet performed), we only ask:

(2) If you wanted to do Y, would anything prevent you from doing Y?

If the answer to (2) is No, then you are free to do Y.

Example: A classic example of NOT being free is imprisonment: Your act of staying in prison is not a free choice because (presumably) it's not something you WANT to be doing. And you're not free to leave because you are forcibly PREVENTED from doing so.

[Side note. Consider the following cases:

- **Hypnosis:** *You are hypnotized into wanting to cluck like a chicken, and you do so.*
- **Brain Chip:** *Scientists stimulate my brain, making me want to punch myself. I do.*
- **Drug Addict:** *An addict has an uncontrollable urge to shoot heroin, and he does.*

What would the compatibilist account given above say about whether or not the agents above act freely? What would YOU say? Are your answers the same?]

Determinism is Irrelevant: This definition of freedom is compatible with determinism because it does not require that a free action be accompanied by the ability to do otherwise. Imagine that your entire future is determined, and has been determined by the laws of physics for billions of years. You enter a voting booth in November. You vote for Trump. Though your action is determined, we can still ask: Was that what you WANTED to do? Did anything PREVENT you from doing it? If 'yes' and 'no', then the action is free, regardless of whether or not your action was determined.

2. The Ability to Do Otherwise: You might be thinking, "Yeah, but if determinism is true, your vote for Trump can't be free. You COULDN'T have voted for Clinton! For, if determinism is true, then you couldn't have done otherwise *even if you had wanted to!*"

Reply #1: You CAN do otherwise: The compatibilist will immediately point out a mistake. The fact is that you COULD have done otherwise **if you had wanted to**. In other words, if you had WANTED to vote for Clinton, nothing was preventing you from doing so.

Contrast this with the prisoner (if they wanted to leave, they WOULD be prevented from doing so). However, you ARE free to vote for someone other than the candidate whom you did vote for (for, if you had wanted to do so, nothing would have stopped you).

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities: The fact remains that, if determinism is true, then you couldn't have done otherwise. But, how is that irrelevant?

We ordinarily think that freedom requires the ability to do otherwise. Indeed, the LACK of the ability to do otherwise seems to be what makes it obvious that one is NOT free to choose in cases where people are coerced (e.g., your big brother forcibly takes your arm and hits you with it, saying "Stop hitting yourself!"; or, someone who is held at gunpoint and forced to sign a document, etc.). In those cases, it does not seem that the person is responsible for what they do. In short, the following principle seems true:

Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP): A person is morally responsible for what s/he has done only if s/he could have done otherwise.

Reply #2: Free Choice Without the Ability to Do Otherwise: Compatibilists don't think that we need the ability to do otherwise in order to freely act in light of certain compelling cases. For instance, consider this one, inspired by John Locke:

Locked Room: You are at a party. Little do you know, the room is locked from the outside, and no one can leave. But, you are enjoying yourself. You are eating, drinking, and talking with friends. You decided to stay.

Note that your decision to stay is a free one: It is what you WANT to do, and nothing is PREVENTING you from doing it. At the same time, however, you do NOT have the ability to do otherwise. The only option available to you is to stay at the party.

In short, it seems like your decision to stay at the party is a free one, even though you could not do otherwise. Thus, PAP is false.

Consider another case (adapted from Frankfurt's Jones₃):

Movie Day: Jones has made up his mind to see the new Star Wars movie. On his way to the theater, Black (a hard-core Star Wars fan) approaches Jones and holds him at gunpoint. "If you don't go see the new Star Wars movie right now, I'm going to shoot you," he says. Jones goes to see the movie. He loves it. "Whew!" he thinks. "It's a good thing I was already planning to see this movie!"

Is Jones responsible for his decision to see the movie? Did he see it freely? Most think so. But, note that Jones was in a coercive situation. Black *threatened* Jones. Assume that the threat was so awful that Jones would have followed Black's orders *solely based on the threat*. As it turns out, however, Jones was already planning to see the movie anyway. So, it is not mere COERCION that seems important to removing our responsibility or freedom, Frankfurt says. What ultimately matters is WHY one does what they do. If you do something BECAUSE you are coerced, then you are not responsible. But, if you do something for YOUR OWN reasons, then you ARE responsible—despite the presence of the coercive factors. Frankfurt writes,

"A person may do something in circumstances that leave him no alternative to doing it, without these circumstances actually moving him or leading him to do it—without them playing any role, indeed, in bring it about that he does what he does." (830)

3. The Neurosurgeon Case: Yet, we don't *quite* have a counter-example to PAP yet, because you could object: But, Jones COULD do otherwise in the Movie case. Namely, he could choose not to go to the movie, and be killed by Black. It isn't a very GOOD option, but he still has the ability to choose that option nevertheless.

So Frankfurt alters his case. Consider one last case (adapted from his Jones₄):

Election Day: Tomorrow is Election Day. Carson, a Trump enthusiast and prominent neurosurgeon who wants to get as many Trump votes as possible, sneaks into Jones's bedroom while he is sleeping. He installs a chip in Jones's brain. This chip, when activated, forces a person to vote for Trump. When unactivated, it does nothing at all. On Election Day, Carson watches Jones carefully. If it looks as if Jones won't vote for Trump, Carson will activate the chip and force him to do so. As it turns out, however, Jones DOES vote for Trump. Carson never has to activate the chip.

We might ask: Did Jones FREELY vote for Trump in this story? It seems so. But, notice that there was NO POSSIBLE WAY for Jones to have done otherwise. NO MATTER WHAT, Jones could have done nothing other than vote for Trump.

So, here we seem to have case where someone lacks the ability to do otherwise, and yet they DO seem to be responsible for their decision, and the decision DOES seem to have been made freely. In other words, PAP is false. We may state Frankfurt's argument as follows (referring to the version of Election Day where the neurosurgeon does NOT intervene):

1. In Election Day, Jones could not do otherwise.
2. In Election Day, Jones is responsible for his action.
3. Therefore, being responsible for one's action does not require the ability to do otherwise (i.e., PAP is false).

Conclusion: Frankfurt points out that, in cases like these, what makes your action free has to do with the REASONS for your actions. In Election Day, Jones votes for Trump **because he WANTS to**. So, we say that he is responsible for his decision. On the other hand, if the neurosurgeon had intervened, Jones would have been voting for Trump **because the neurosurgeon made him do it**. If that were the case, then it seems like Jones would NOT be responsible for his decision. And something similar can be said about the Locked Room case. Frankfurt rejects PAP in favor of the following principle:

Frankfurt's Replacement of PAP (call it 'PAP+'): A person is morally responsible for what s/he has done only if (a) s/he could have done otherwise, or (b) s/he could NOT have done otherwise, but s/he does not act SOLELY for this reason.

Note that this also explains why Jones is responsible for his decision in Movie Day, where he goes to the movie because he WANTS TO (not because Black is coercing him).

Even if coercive factors DO play some role in the decision-making, Jones is STILL responsible for his action so long as he WANTS to do what he is being coerced to do (PAP+ says that Jones is responsible so long as he is not acting SOLELY for this reason).