

Harry G Frankfurt, *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person*

Frankfurt claims in this work that he is “neutral with regard to determinism,” but as a blatant compatibilist, he supports that an act can be both determined and free. In Frankfurt’s progression towards supporting compatibilism he expresses a good network of steps; first order desires, second order desires and second order volitions. The measure of a person for Frankfurt is the ability and inclusion of second order volitions in will; “it is only because a person has the volitions of the second order that he is capable of both enjoying and lacking freedom of the will.”

I will now outline this work of Frankfurt’s:

After explaining the difference between humans and animals, he goes on in support of free will. The crucial aspect to this defense seems to be the statement “ Thus the notion of the will is not coextensive with the notion of what and agent intends to do.” Following this, the crutch of much of Frankfurt’s theory is, “Someone might want to have a certain desire, in other words, but univocally want that desire to be unsatisfied.” I cannot accept this notion. If a person, as defined by Frankfurt, truly has a certain desire then that person’s second order volition will come into action and allow said person to satisfy the desire. Frankfurt offers a physician as a counter example, who wants to know what it is like to be addicted to “x” in order to help his patients. If the physician’s desire is a “genuine desire” then it will take control of him and ironically enough, *he* will need a physician.

Throughout the work Frankfurt makes effort to define his terms. In section “II” he defines second order desires as “want[ing] simply to have a certain desire” and second order volitions as “when he wants a certain desire to be his will.” These are important distinctions to understand Frankfurt’s position. Also, a “wanton” creature is one that has no second order volitions and “has no identity apart from his first order desires.” But, Frankfurt admits on page 176 that “in either case he does something that he himself wants to do.”

Frankfurt says that the “ essence of being a person lies not in reason but in will,” and I think that this is a valid statement. Only, Frankfurt then goes on to say that people can be overcome by their desires and then, in effect have had their will conquered. I would hold that a person’s will is not conquered, only diminished and it is a matter of fortitude if a person can or is willing to fight back.

A key division to understanding Frankfurt’s work is the division of “acting freely” and having a “will that is free.” He considers these two different aspects, and I agree that they are. Based on this Frankfurt goes on to say that an “unwilling addict’s” will is not free. Since it is not the will the addict “wants.” Again I refute this on the previous basis that, if the “unwilling addict” did not want to be addicted as badly as is claimed, then that would be his will, but since the “unwilling addict” is still addicted, then his true will is to be addicted. If as Frankfurt implies, the will is the defining characteristic of the person, then I say that the defining characteristic of the person, with reason, is strong enough to overcome addictions. A person who is addicted and continues to be is a wanton addict, they do not truly desire to be free from their addiction. Perhaps peer pressure or rearing is

the root of what I will call, “false second order desires,” (essentially, a second order desire in people who continue to be addicted.)

I like the inclusion in Frankfurt’s work about the theoretical limit of higher orders and how it could lead toward the destruction of a person. I am not sure what to say about this section, I think I need to ponder it further.

A statement that Frankfurt leaves open-ended, and I question why, is “A person who is free to do what he wants to do may yet not be in a position to have all the will he wants.” I do not find that this thought is well developed and I am suspicious of that.

Finally, seemingly to justify determinism, Frankfurt includes the debate of when someone is responsible for what he has done. On this Frankfurt says “ he may be morally responsible for having done it even though his will was not free at all.” To justify this the question of “could he have done otherwise” is introduced. If that is the requirement for free will, then I would hold all will is free, because I can think of no reasonable situations where a person does not have at least one other option than an action or decision taken (or not taken), regardless of the desired outcome. That, as posed by Frankfurt, a person could make a decision, and unknowingly not be able to have made a different one, is a moot point. The person in that case carried out their free will. Frankfurt’s “Decision Inducer” thought experiment, in my view is a moot point.

I think that Frankfurt’s most valid point is that “the enjoyment of freedom comes easily to some. Others must struggle to achieve it.” Based on this, I hold that there is free will.