
Alternate possibilities and the action-omission distinction

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Résumé

”Alternate possibilities” and the action-omission distinction

P. Swenson (2015, 2016) defended the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP) against Frankfurt’s notorious attack by exploiting certain intuitions we have concerning moral responsibility for omissions. To show that in standard Frankfurt-style cases (FSC’s) the agent is in fact not morally responsible for her action, Swenson constructed a series of interconnected thought experiments involving no alternate possibilities. The series starts with a clear-cut case of lack of moral responsibility for an omission and ends with a typical FSC. Swenson argued that no principled line can be drawn anywhere in between, and therefore *pace* Frankfurt, we should conclude there is no moral responsibility in typical FSC’s either.

I argue that the action-omission distinction, in terms of which the problem raised by Swenson is usually framed in the literature, is a red herring. I show that the problem is generated instead by how the action performed/omitted by the agent is described, for sometimes the action descriptions Swenson employs build in a certain outcome. I introduce a distinction between X-ing, on the one hand, and deciding to X, trying to X and acting so as to X, on the other hand, and I argue that when (PAP) is reformulated in terms of the latter rather than the former, it is still vulnerable to Frankfurt’s attack. For all Swenson has said, Frankfurt may very well be right that moral responsibility for deciding to X, trying to X, acting so as to X (as well as for the corresponding omissions) does not require having the power to do otherwise. I show that reformulating (PAP) in this manner leaves intact the broader metaphysical significance of Frankfurt’s argument against (PAP): If moral responsibility doesn’t require the power to do otherwise, then the power to do otherwise is not necessary for the type of freedom needed for moral responsibility, which helps clear the ground for a defense of compatibilism.

References

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Mots-Clés: action, omission, moral responsibility, alternate possibilities