Philosophy of Mind

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The Coast is Not Clear: A Frankfurt-friendly Account of Action

1.0 – Introduction

This paper offers an alternative view in the discussion of passive action between Harry Frankfurt (1978) and Alfred Mele (1997). First, I will describe Frankfurt's noncausal account of action. Second, I will present counterexamples on behalf of Mele's causal account. Then, I will introduce the *Frankfurt-friendly View* (FFV) which captures Frankfurt's judgments about action while rejecting Frankfurt-style cases. I will explore what constitutes and explains actions in each view. I will then analyze the counterexamples using Mele's view and the FFV. Finally, I will explain the interpretive differences between the competing views.

2.0 – Scope

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain in detail how one may reject Frankfurt-style cases. Briefly, the FFV is noteworthily informed by Maria Alvarez (2009) and Helen Steward (2012), both of whom deny Frankfurt-style cases in different fashions. Alvarez calls into question the conceptual possibility of Frankfurt-style cases. Steward, on the other hand, denies that Frankfurt-style cases succeed in describing action that is attributable to an agent in the sense required for moral responsibility. It will suffice for this work to posit that the FFV denies

Frankfurt-style cases outright for the sake of developing an alternative view in the passive action discussion.

3.0 – Frankfurt's Noncausal Theory of Action

Frankfurt argues that causal theories of action are implausible on the following grounds. A feature of causal theories is that they "imply that actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves at all" (Frankfurt, 157). Further, actions and mere happenings are not differentiated by anything during the time of action, but by some difference in their causal past (Frankfurt, 157). Thus, causal theories are "committed to supposing that a person who knows he is in the midst of performing an action cannot have derived this knowledge from any awareness of what is currently happening, but that he must have derived it instead from his understanding of how what is happening was caused to happen by certain earlier conditions" (Frankfurt, 157). Since the causal antecedents at earlier times are constitutive of the action, causal theories do not stipulate any relation between an agent and their bodily movements *during* the time in which the agent performs an action (Frankfurt, 157). In this respect, the focus of causal theories is misplaced since they "direct attention exclusively away from the events whose natures are at issue, and away from the times at which they occur" (Frankfurt, 157). Thus, Frankfurt rejects causal theories of action, and, instead, opts for a noncausal account.

Frankfurt's noncausal account aims at characterizing action during the time at which the action occurs. Since, according to Frankfurt, causal antecedents are not present during the time of the action, they cannot be constitutive of action. What, then, constitutes an action on Frankfurt's account? Frankfurt considers bodily movement to be partially constitutive of action. More specifically, an action is "comprised by a bodily movement and by whatever state of affairs or activity constitutes the agent's guidance of [the action]" (159). Of course, it is not an essential

feature of bodily movement that it is "causally affected by the mechanism under whose guidance the movement proceeds" (Frankfurt, 160). What makes an action, then, is a *person's guidance of a bodily movement* regardless of the prior causal history that accounts for the fact that the movement is occurring (Frankfurt, 157).

Further, the bodily movement must be an instance of *purposive movement* guided by the agent (Frankfurt, 159). Frankfurt states that "behavior is purposive when its course is subject to adjustments which compensate for the effects of forces which would otherwise interfere with the course of the behavior" (160). Not all instances of purposive movements are instances of action. For example, an agent's pupil dilating when the light fades is a purposive movement. It is not an action, though, because the course of the pupil's movement is not under the agent's guidance (Frankfurt, 159). Therefore, for purposive movement to be an action rather than a mere reflex, the movement must be under the agent's guidance.

Frankfurt considers the following example. A driver – let's call him Al – is in an automobile that is coasting downhill by virtue of gravitational forces alone (Frankfurt, 160). Al is satisfied with the speed and direction of the automobile, so he may never intervene to adjust its course in any way (Frankfurt, 160). This coasting scenario is an instance of passive action in which Al does not appear to be guiding a bodily movement; he is merely coasting because of gravitational forces. What *makes* Al's coasting an action? On Frankfurt's account, Al's coasting is an action since "he was prepared to intervene if necessary, and […] he was in a position to do so more or less effectively" (160). In other words, Al is *prepared to do otherwise* than he does. Al is prepared to intervene with the coasting, and his preparedness to intervene is what makes his coasting an action. Thus, passive actions, such as Al's coasting, are considered actions in Frankfurt's view insofar as the agent is prepared to intervene if necessary.

4.0 – Mele's Critique of Frankfurt

Mele offers critiques of Frankfurt's position using the coasting scenario. First, Mele attributes to Al a pertinent desire or intention to coast; after all, Al is satisfied with his coasting, and his having a desire and intention to coast makes sense of his satisfaction (Mele, 137). (A more detailed discussion on the explanatory work of Al's mental states is presented in section nine).

Notice that Al's desire and intention to coast are compatible with Frankfurt's view and the FFV. Even with a suitable mental cause, Al's coasting is an action *not because of that mental cause* but because he "was prepared to intervene if necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively" (Frankfurt, 160). Therefore, Al's coasting is an action, regardless of his causal history, because he was prepared to intervene.

Mele finds this reply problematic and asks us to reconsider the coasting scenario. Imagine that Al was satisfied with his coasting and did not intervene (138). Further, suppose that if Al intended to intervene, an irresistible mind-reading demon would not have allowed him to intervene (138). Had Al abandoned his intention to coast or decided to intervene, the demon would have paralyzed Al, leaving him unable to intervene (138).

In Mele's view, Al's coasting is an action partly because of how it is caused. In this case, Al's coasting is an action partly because of the causal role that his mental states play in producing the coasting. Since Al has an *intention and desire* to coast, his coasting is an action. Thus, Mele concludes that Al's coasting is an action even though he is *not* in a position to intervene since the demon would have prevented Al from intervening (Mele, 139). What accounts for Al's coasting being an action, then, does not include his being in a position to

intervene (Mele, 139). Therefore, ironically, Mele has threatened Frankfurt's account using a Frankfurt-style case.

Mele introduces another coasting scenario in which Al is a reckless fellow who decides to continue coasting *no matter what* (139). Further, Al has no conditional intention to intervene (139). Al has *made up his mind* that he will coast no matter what, and he's *committed* to doing so. Mele concludes that Al's coasting is an action even though he is not prepared to intervene (139). Things look dire for Frankfurt's account, but the FFV manages to avoid these counterexamples.

5.0 – The Frankfurt-friendly View

Mele's first counterexample poses a serious threat to Frankfurt's account since, for the sake of consistency, he cannot deny Frankfurt-style cases. However, the FFV is unique because it rejects Frankfurt-style cases outright while capturing all of Frankfurt's other judgments on action. Let's address each of Mele's coasting counterexamples within the FFV's framework.

6.0 – The FFV's Reply to Mele's First Counterexample

Given that the FFV denies Frankfurt-style cases outright, courtesy of Maria Alvarez (2009) and Helen Steward (2012), Mele's first counterexample is rendered ineffective. Any attempt to object to the FFV using Frankfurt-style cases will be misplaced at best. The FFV is Frankfurtian only with respect to action and, therefore, need not be committed to endorsing Frankfurt-style cases. Further, it is consistent under the FFV to deny Frankfurt-style cases because an agent's preparedness to do otherwise is partially constitutive of action. Thus, while it is a significant objection to Frankfurt's view, Mele's first counterexample does not threaten the FFV since it involves a Frankfurt-style case.

6.1 – The FFV's Reply to Mele's Second Counterexample

Mele's second counterexample is a direct threat to the FFV since it does not involve a Frankfurt-style case. Mele uses the reckless Al coasting scenario to target the claim that "what counts [for action] is that [Al] was prepared to intervene if necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively" (160). The counterexample is intended to show that Al's being prepared to intervene is *not* required for his coasting to be an action. Why does this counterexample fail? To answer this question, let's analyze two readings of preparedness that appear to be at play.

7.0 – Two Readings of Preparedness (Thick and Thin)

Mele's second counterexample is grounded by a *thick* notion of preparedness, which, following his causal account, involves more than merely the ability to intervene. Mele's thick notion of preparedness is demanding in that Al's preparedness amounts to his having relevant mental states such as beliefs, desires, and intentions. Al is prepared to intervene insofar as he has, for example, a desire or intention to intervene if necessary.

The FFV takes on a *thin* notion of preparedness, which amounts to merely the ability to intervene if necessary. The FFV's thin sense of preparedness is less demanding in that Al is prepared to intervene insofar as he is able to do otherwise than he does. In the following sections, I will describe how these two understandings of preparedness diverge.

7.1 – Mele's Thick Sense of Preparedness

Mele claims that reckless Al is not prepared to intervene. Recall the thick sense of preparedness. Al is not prepared to intervene because of his mental states, namely, his desire and intention to coast. More specifically, Al is purposively and intentionally coasting (Mele, 139). Al

has decided that “no matter what, he will continue coasting” (Mele, 139). Further, Al has a desire to coast and he “has no conditional intention to intervene” (Mele, 139). In other words, Al has made up his mind about coasting and is committed to doing so. Since Al is committed to coasting in virtue of his mental states, he is not prepared to intervene. Therefore, under the thick sense of preparedness, Al is not prepared to intervene.

7.2 – FFV’s Thin Sense of Preparedness

The FFV’s thin sense of preparedness is as follows. Al’s preparedness is understood as his ability to intervene if necessary. More specifically, Al is prepared to intervene insofar as he is able to do otherwise than he does. Ability is meant straightforwardly here, namely, an ability to intervene amounts to being “in a position to [intervene] more or less effectively” (Frankfurt, 160). We have assumed that Al is not paralyzed, the car is functioning properly, he can guide his movements with the appropriate control, and so on. Thus, Al is able to do otherwise than continue coasting, namely, Al is able to stop coasting. Therefore, Al is prepared to intervene according to the thin sense of preparedness.

8.0 – The New Coasting Scenario

Two competing interpretations of preparedness have now been presented. To bring out their differences more clearly, let’s consider the following coasting example.

Imagine that reckless Al has grown tired of being used as an agent in coasting scenarios and becomes suicidal. He coasts towards the edge of a tall cliff. We can preserve the spirit of Mele’s original scenario by assuming that Al decides to coast no matter what, and that he has no conditional intention to intervene. Al has made up his mind about the coasting and is committed to coasting. However, halfway through his course, Al spots his entire family in the middle of the

road forming a human barrier to stop him before he reaches the cliff. Al stomps on the brakes and stops the car before things end badly for him and his family.

In the following sections, I will aim to answer two questions related to the new coasting scenario: first, what makes Al's coasting and stopping actions, and second, what explains those actions? Given the distinction between the thick and thin sense of preparedness, one should expect differences in each view's answers to the posed questions. Let's begin with Mele's view.

8.1 – Mele's Analysis of the New Coasting Scenario

Mele's analysis of the new coasting scenario will be closely related to the analysis of the original coasting scenario given in section 7.1, and for good reason. In both scenarios, Al's mental states are essentially the same in that he has decided to coast no matter what and he has no conditional intention to intervene. Before Al spots his family, then, his coasting is an action because of the causal role his mental states play in producing the coasting. Under Mele's thick sense of preparedness, Al is not prepared to intervene with his coasting because of those mental states. Al is not prepared to stop because he has *made up his mind* about the coasting. Once again, Al is *committed* to coasting insofar as he has no intention to stop coasting. Therefore, Al's coasting is an action.

What makes Al's *stopping* an action? A natural answer to this question for the causal theorist is to appeal to the causal mechanisms which bring about the stopping. Indeed, that is the route that Mele takes. Al's mental states play a causal role in producing the stopping. For example, Al's desire to keep his family from harm plays a causal role in producing the stopping. Therefore, both Al's coasting and stopping are actions partly because of how those actions are caused, which includes the causal role that Al's mental states play in producing those actions.

8.2 – The FFV Analysis of the New Coasting Scenario

Now, let's analyze the new coasting scenario within the FFV. As discussed earlier, what makes Al's coasting an action is that he was prepared to intervene if necessary. Recall that Al's being able to intervene is simply his being in a position to do so effectively. Under the thin sense of preparedness, Al *is* prepared to intervene since he is *able* to do otherwise than he does. Al is able to do otherwise than he does since he is not paralyzed, the car is working properly, and so on. Thus, Al is prepared to intervene with his coasting. Therefore, Al's coasting is an action.

We can extend this conclusion to the original coasting scenario in section 6.1, where Al's coasting is an action since he was prepared to intervene if necessary. It just so happens that in Mele's original scenario, Al never found it necessary to intervene with his coasting. Nothing arises in that scenario that prompts Al's intervention. But Al is prepared to intervene, using the FFV's thin sense of preparedness, since he is able to do otherwise than he in fact does. Therefore, Al's coasting is an action in both the original and new coasting scenario since he is prepared to intervene in both cases.

What makes Al's *stopping* an action? First, Al's stopping is a purposive movement under his guidance, which is partially constitutive of action in the FFV. Further, Al's stopping is an action insofar as he is prepared to intervene with his stopping. Just as Al's coasting is an action insofar as he is prepared to intervene with the coasting if necessary, Al's stopping is an action insofar as he is prepared to intervene with his stopping if necessary. Of course, under the thin sense of preparedness, Al is prepared to intervene with his stopping since he is able to continue coasting. Thus, Al's preparedness to continue coasting (and not intervene with his stopping) is partially constitutive of Al's stopping.

We have arrived at an important difference between each view. On one hand, Mele holds that Al's stopping is an action partly because of how it is caused, which includes the causal role that his mental states play in producing the stopping. On the other hand, the FFV holds that Al's stopping is an action partly because he was prepared to intervene with his stopping if necessary. Therefore, the two views disagree over what constitutes action. Now, let's consider what explains Al's stopping on each view.

9.0 – What Explains Al's Stopping?

Thus far, we have explored what makes Al's coasting and stopping an action. But what *explains* Al's actions? In other words, in virtue of what does Al act? For this section, let's focus solely on the action of Al's stopping, beginning with Mele's account.

9.1 – Mele's Explanation of the Stopping

Recall Mele's analysis of the new coasting scenario. Al has made up his mind that he will continue to coast no matter what, and he is committed to coasting. In other words, Al has a desire and intention to coast no matter what. This does not imply that Al will continue coasting despite spotting his family on the road. Given that Al is a sane and rational agent, he will indeed stop his car before harming his family. What explains Al's stopping?

Mele's view explains Al's stopping in terms of his psychological makeup, which includes mental states such as beliefs, desires, and intentions. Al has a desire and intention to coast no matter what because he is suicidal. But there are, of course, other relevant mental states that constitute Al's psychology. For example, whether it crosses his mind directly or not, Al has a desire to keep his family safe. (He is suicidal, not murderous.) Further, Al likely has a belief that running his family over will harm his family. To explain Al's stopping, then, Mele's view can

maintain that Al *abandons* his intention to coast no matter what in virtue of his desire or intention to keep his family safe. Essentially, Al has abandoned the intention to coast no matter for another intention, namely, an intention to keep his family safe. Al's stopping, then, is explained by his relevant mental states. Thus, mental states in Mele's view are significant because they may play a causal role in producing actions.

9.2 – FFV's Explanation of the Stopping

The FFV takes a similar approach. Recall that Al's mental states need not be excluded from the FFV. Even with a suitable mental cause, Al's stopping is an action *not because of that mental cause* but because he "was prepared to intervene if necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively" (Frankfurt, 160). Thus, the FFV can appeal to Al's mental states to explain Al's stopping. Though mental states are not constitutive of action in this view, one should still expect that Al's actions are compatible and consistent with his mental states. By stopping the car, Al has purposively guided his bodily movement in a way that is consistent with his desire and intention to keep his family safe.

One might naturally question why the FFV does not opt for an explanation of action in terms of ability rather than mental states. If the FFV were to explain Al's stopping in terms of ability, then the view would lack explanatory power. Abilities in and of themselves, such as the ability to intervene if necessary, do not explain *why* actions occur. Simply having the ability to act does not explain why an agent performs that action. Thus, it would be puzzling to posit that Al's stopping is explained by his ability to stop. After all, Al's having the ability to stop does not necessarily mean that he will stop.

There is a reason that Al stops in the new coasting scenario but not in the original coasting scenario. Al's ability to stop is identical in both cases. What, then, explains his stopping in the new coasting scenario? The most plausible answer is the one explored above, namely, that his mental states explain his stopping.

10.0 – Which Route to Take?

Mele's view and the FFV are at odds regarding Al's preparedness to intervene. The former interprets Al's preparedness in a thick sense, in which being prepared to intervene requires a desire or intention to intervene if necessary. The latter, on the other hand, interprets Al's preparedness in a thin sense, in which being prepared to intervene is chalked up to being able to intervene. The question remains: which view is more plausible? To answer this question, let's examine a different kind of case than the ones presented thus far.

11.0 – The Innocent Baby

Imagine that somebody offers Al a single penny to torture a newborn baby. (Poor Al cannot seem to catch a break.) Given that Al is sane and rational, he decides to decline the offer. Here, we can take Al's *decision* to decline the offer as an action, and, more specifically, a mental action. (We need not get into the specifics of mental action to appreciate the point of the example.) Now, let's consider what each view has to say about this case.

11.1 – Mele's Analysis of Al's Decision

As we saw in earlier sections, Al's mental states both partially constitute and explain his actions. Al's decision to decline the offer is partially constituted by his mental states. Al's decision is explained by his mental states, for example, his desire or intention not to harm individuals (especially newborn babies). Even if the reward were of a significantly higher value,

say, one million dollars, Al would not accept the offer. His psychology is constituted such that he simply *cannot bring himself* to accept the offer, much less torture innocent babies. Al's psychology is such that he is *committed* to declining offers that involve torturing babies. In other words, Al is *not able* to accept the offer in virtue of his mental states.

11.2 – The FFV's Analysis of Al's Decision

In the FFV, what makes Al's decision an action is that he was prepared to do otherwise, such as make another decision, or make no decision at all, etc. What *explains* Al's decision? Recall that both Mele's view and the FFV agree that mental states such as beliefs, desires, and intentions explain actions. Al decides to decline the offer because he has no desire or intention to harm individuals. In the FFV, we should simply expect that Al's decision is consistent with his mental states, though they are not constitutive of Al's decision.

There is some important nuance to be appreciated here. In the FFV, Al's deciding to decline the offer is an action since he was prepared to do otherwise. Using the thin sense of preparedness, Al is prepared to do otherwise insofar as he is able to do otherwise than he does. In this case, Al *is able* to accept the offer and, further, Al *is able* to torture the baby. This is exactly what is constitutive of action in the FFV, namely, that Al is prepared to do otherwise than he does. Al is prepared to say, for example, "I accept your offer," since he can purposively guide his bodily movements (such as the movement of his mouth) in a way conducive of saying such a sentence. Further, Al is prepared to torture the baby insofar as he is able to purposively guide his bodily movements in a way conducive to torture. Thus, Al *can bring himself* to accept the offer and torture the baby given that he has the ability to do so, despite his psychology being so constituted that he has no desire or intention to commit such acts. However, note that Al's deciding to accept the offer and thereby torture the baby is incompatible with his mental states.

The reason he decides to decline the offer is because of his relevant mental states. Therefore, we should not expect that Al will accept the offer simply because he is able and prepared to do so in the thin sense of prepardness.

11.3 – The Big Picture for Al's Decision

The important difference between Mele's view and the FFV is whether Al is *able* to bring himself to accept the offer and thereby torture the baby. Yet again, there appears to be another interpretive difference between the two views. On the one hand, Mele holds that Al *cannot* bring himself to accept the offer in virtue of his mental states. Al is essentially precluded from deciding to accept the offer given that he has no desire or intention to harm other individuals. Thus, Al is not able to decide to accept the offer in Mele's view.

On the other hand, the FFV holds that Al *can* bring himself to accept the offer. Al has the ability to decide to accept the offer and thereby torture the baby, namely, he can guide his bodily movements in the relevant way conducive to those actions. Despite his beliefs, desires, and intentions, Al is able to accept the offer. Note once more that a charitable reading of the FFV is one in which Al's actions (such as deciding to accept the offer) are compatible with his mental states even though his mental states are not constitutive of his actions. Thus, Al is able to decide to accept the offer in the FFV.

12.0 – Reader's Digest

At this stage, the two views seem to be at an impasse. There are several interpretive differences regarding preparedness and ability. Ultimately, the reader should settle on a view based on their preferences on those interpretations. If a thin sense of preparedness and ability is satisfactory, then one should side with the FFV. However, one might find that the thin sense of

preparedness and ability is not demanding enough. For example, in the case of Al's decision to decline the offer to torture the baby, is it plausible to consider his decision an action based merely on his ability to do something other than he does? I leave this up to the reader to consider. One might alternatively side with Mele's view, which endorses a thick sense of preparedness and ability.

Both views agree that mental states *explain* actions. However, the views disagree over what *makes* or *constitutes* an action. Thus, the reader should consider whether a causal account of action, such as Mele's view, or a noncausal account of action, such as the FFV, offers a better explanation of what constitutes actions.

13.0 - Conclusion

The FFV presented in this paper captures Frankfurt's noncausal account of action while flat-out rejecting Frankfurt-style cases. The FFV remains defensible against Mele's coasting counterexamples. Mele's view endorses a thick sense of preparedness, in which Al is prepared to intervene in virtue of his mental states. The FFV holds a thin sense of preparedness, in which Al is prepared to intervene insofar as he is able to intervene. The views disagree over whether agents have the ability to perform certain actions given their mental states. I leave it open to the reader to settle on a view of their preference.

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