

Philosophy of Mind

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The Coast is Not Clear

1.0 – Introduction

This paper offers an alternative view in the discussion of passive action between Harry Frankfurt and Alfred Mele. First, I will describe Frankfurt's noncausal account of action. Second, I will present counterexamples that Mele, a causal theorist, poses to that account. Finally, I will lay out the *new view* that captures Frankfurt's judgments about action while remaining defensible against Mele's counterexamples.

2.0 – Scope

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain in detail how one might deny Frankfurt-style cases. The new view is noteworthy informed by Maria Alvarez (2009) and Helen Steward (2012), both of whom deny Frankfurt-style cases in different ways. Alvarez calls into question the conceptual possibility of Frankfurt-style cases. Steward, on the other hand, targets the claim 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 deny Frankfurt-style cases outright to develop an unexpected view in the passive action discussion.

3.0 – Frankfurt's Noncausal Theory of Action

Frankfurt holds causal theories of action are implausible on the following grounds. Causal theories "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 some earlier time 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, causal theories “direct attention exclusively away from the events whose natures are at issue, and away from the times at which they occur” (Frankfurt, 157). Frankfurt, therefore, commits to a noncausal theory of action.

To avoid the issues just stated, Frankfurt endorses his noncausal theory of action. In his view, action is “comprised by a bodily movement and by whatever state of affairs or activity constitutes the agent’s guidance of it” (159). Unlike causal theories, an action consists of a bodily movement that is under a person’s guidance, regardless of the prior causal history that accounts for the fact that the movement is occurring (Frankfurt, 157). It is not essential to the bodily movement that it is “causally affected by the mechanism under whose guidance the movement proceeds” (Frankfurt, 160). Further, the bodily movement must be an instance of purposive movement guided by the agent (Frankfurt, 159). He 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, but not an action, since the course of movement is not under the agent’s

guidance (Frankfurt, 159). Therefore, an action is an intentional bodily movement that is guided by the agent.

Frankfurt asks us to consider 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 movement in any way (Frankfurt, 160). On Frankfurt’s account, Al’s coasting is purposive since “what counts is that he was prepared to intervene if necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively” (160). Thus, passive actions, such as Al’s coasting, are actions insofar as the agent satisfies the above notions of purposiveness.

4.0 – Mele’s Response

Mele critiques Frankfurt’s position using the coasting example. First, Mele attributes to Al a pertinent desire or intention to coast; after all, Al is satisfied with his coasting, and his having an intention to coast makes sense of his satisfaction (Mele, 137). Notice that this move is compatible with Frankfurt’s view; even with a suitable mental cause, Al’s coasting is purposive 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). (Interpretive issues on this point will be discussed in section five).

However, Mele finds that Frankfurt’s reply is problematic and asks us to reconsider the coasting scenario. Let’s say that Al was satisfied with his coasting and did not intervene (Mele, 138). Further, let’s say that although Al intended to intervene if necessary, an irresistible mind-reading demon would not have allowed him to intervene (Mele, 138). Had Al abandoned his intention to coast or decided to intervene, the demon would have paralyzed Al (Mele, 138). Mele

then concludes that Al's coasting was purposive even though he was *not* in a position to intervene (Mele, 139). What accounts for the purposiveness of Al's behavior, then, does not include his being in a position to intervene (Mele, 139). Therefore, ironically, Mele has defeated Frankfurt's account by invoking a Frankfurt-style case.

Another objection Mele raises in the coasting scenario is as follows. Imagine that Al is a reckless fellow who decides to continue coasting *no matter what* (Mele, 139). Further, Al has no conditional intention to intervene (Mele, 139). In this case, Mele concludes that Al's coasting is purposive even though he is not prepared to intervene (139). While things may look dire for Frankfurt's account, the new view manages to avoid these counterexamples.

5.0 – The New View

Mele's first counterexample is successful against Frankfurt's account since, obviously, Frankfurt cannot deny Frankfurt-style cases without jeopardizing his philosophical framework. However, the new view, to which I am coming, is relatively unexplored in this discussion. A crucial element of the new view is that it denies Frankfurt-style cases (as discussed in section two). Further, the new view captures all of Frankfurt's judgments on action and passive action. The new view manages to avoid Mele's counterexamples. Let's address each counterexample in order.

6.0 – Mele's First Counterexample

Given that the new view denies Frankfurt-style cases outright, courtesy of Maria Alvarez (2009) and Helen Steward (2012), Mele's first counterexample is rendered ineffective. Any invocation of Frankfurt-style cases against the new view will be fruitless. The new view is Frankfurtian only regarding purposive action and, therefore, need not be committed to the

endorsement of Frankfurt-style cases. (Note that Frankfurt himself cannot accept the new view.) Thus, the new view is safe from Mele's first counterexample.

6.1 – Mele's Second Counterexample

Mele's second counterexample does not invoke a Frankfurt-style case. Instead, the second counterexample targets Frankfurt's claim that "what counts is that [Al] was prepared to intervene if necessary, and that he was in a position to do so more or less effectively" (160). There are different ways to interpret this claim. Mele's interpretation of Al's preparedness differs from the new view in crucial respects.

Mele claims that reckless Al is purposively and intentionally coasting despite his not being prepared to intervene (139). But, in what sense is Al unprepared to intervene in this scenario? Per Mele, Al has *decided* that "no matter what, he will continue coasting" (139). Further, Al "has no conditional intention to intervene" (Mele, 139). On these grounds, Mele has taken a serious interpretation of being prepared to intervene. That is, an agent is not prepared to intervene insofar as they have decided *not* to intervene. Mele seems to have in mind the following: Al has decided to continue coasting no matter what, and, since he has no conditional intention to intervene, he is not prepared to intervene. Therefore, Al's coasting is purposive despite not being prepared to intervene. This view is plausible and consistent under the interpretation of preparedness that Mele holds in the coasting scenario.

On the other hand, the new view explains Al's being prepared to intervene in terms of his *ability* to intervene. Al is prepared to intervene insofar as Al is able to intervene. Al being able to intervene amounts to his being "in a position to [intervene] more or less effectively" (Frankfurt, 160). The new view and Frankfurt's view agree on this interpretive point.

Imagine that Al is both reckless and suicidal. He is coasting towards the edge of a cliff. Per Mele's original coasting scenario, let's say that Al decides to coast no matter what, and that he has no conditional intention to intervene. However, halfway through his course, Al spots his entire family in the middle of the road, forming a human barrier to stop him before it's too late. Al responds by pumping the brakes and stopping before anybody's life is threatened. What can we say about Al's purposive coasting?

Both the new view and Mele's view agree that Al's coasting *is* purposive. Those views disagree, however, on how to interpret Al's being prepared to intervene. The new view holds that, in this scenario, Al *was* prepared to intervene if necessary since he was in a position to do so effectively. Al found it necessary, despite his recklessness, to intervene with his coasting upon seeing his family on the road. Al is prepared to intervene at any moment during his coasting, should anything necessitate his intervention, since he is in a position to intervene. After all, the car is working properly, Al is not paralyzed, and so on. Therefore, under the new view's interpretation, Al is prepared to intervene.

Recall Mele's original reckless coasting example. It just so happens that Al never found it necessary to intervene with his coasting. Nothing arises in that scenario that prompts Al's intervention. Given Al's decision to coast no matter what, and his conditional intention not to intervene, it seems that Al is not prepared to intervene.

But, as seen in the newly imagined coasting scenario, Al *is* prepared to intervene under a different interpretation of preparedness. There is an event, namely, his family blocking the road, wherein Al finds it necessary to intervene with his coasting. According to the new view, Al's preparedness is just his being able to intervene (despite making up his mind earlier about the

continued coasting). Thus, the new view diverges from Mele's view in interpreting Frankfurt's claim that what counts in purposive action is that an agent is prepared to intervene if necessary.

6.0 – Conclusion

The new view presented in this paper captures Frankfurt's noncausal account of action while avoiding the powerful counterexamples laid out by Mele. In Mele's view, Al's being prepared to intervene is taken strictly. Al is not prepared to intervene given that he's decided to continue coasting no matter what, and that Al has a conditional intention not to intervene.

However, the new view interprets Al's being prepared to intervene more leniently. Al is prepared to intervene if necessary, insofar as he is able to intervene. Note that both Mele's view and the new view are plausible and that I leave it open to which view better characterizes passive action.

Works Cited

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