Mesh Theories and Acting Rationally

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Abstract: In this paper, I consider the mesh theory of Frankfurt that moral responsibility is assessed by a meshing of first-order desires and second-order volitions. I come to argue that these second-order volitions are our rational decision-making process, and should be praised or blamed on the basis of that volition and whether the agent acted according to it.

Introduction

When talking about moral responsibility, there are many factors that we can consider as posing the main contributing factor for praise or blame. One of the major factors is of a desire to act. If an agent desires to act a certain way, then they can be held responsible for the act. Or at least, this is generally, and intuitively the case. Of course, there are issues, such as implanting a desire in an agents brain with a chip (Griffith, 2009.) This may be an issue of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), however, it helps support an idea where there may be multiple types of desires, first and second order desires (or volitions.) In this brief essay, I will consider Frankfurts second contribution regarding moral praise and blame, looking particularly at first order desires and second order volitions to determine whether an agent can be held responsible by means of a meshing of these desires. First, I will introduce the mesh theory presented by Frankfurt. After that, I will reflect on first order desires, and second order volitions. Then, finally, I will conclude with my argument in inference form, followed by a defense of that argument. I intend to argue that when assessing moral praise or blame, we should only consider the agent's second-order volitions and whether they acted according to them.

To come clean, I have a higher credence of incompatibilism than compatibilism. Incompatibilism is the idea that if we are not free, then we cannot be held responsible. While compatibilism considers that

if we are not free, we can still be held responsible. Further, both of these views focus on determinism, because if we are free, it should be obvious that we are capable of being held responsible. While this intuition is shared by many, it could be possible to attack it, though that is beyond the scope of this essay. I stand as a soft determinist, and as such, all arguments within this paper are hypothetically considering determinism as true.

Mesh Theory Explanation

Consider for a moment what you desire. Do you *desire* to desire it? This might sound redundant, however, consider a smoker. Most smokers do not want to smoke, but they *want* to smoke. This is a simple example of what Frankfurt calls *first-order desires* (FO) and *second-order volitions* (SO). What is meant by this is that our FO's are the desires we have innately and SO's are our conscious decision of whether we actually want to do that act or not (McKenna, 2019.)

For an agent to be held responsible, according the mesh theory, the agents FO's need to be the same as their SO's. For example in the case of the smoker, the FO is to smoke, but the SO is to not smoke. They do not *mesh* in that they are not in line with one another. Thus, the smoker cannot be held responsible for smoking. (Khoury, 2023)

Reflecting on Mesh Theory

The main reason the focus of this essay is on mesh theory is due to a single particular case that seems to contradict mesh theory: the case of Jeffrey Dahmer. Jeffrey Dahmer was a cereal killer who had, if we followed his lifespan, an FO to kill. He had some sort of innate desire to kill, almost primal. However, when caught and detectives wanted to understand just *why* he did it, he would always respond the same: he didn't want to kill, but he just couldn't help himself. This puts him in the same camp as the smoker, according to mesh theory. His FO did not mesh with his SO, and thus, shouldn't be held responsible for his cereal killings.

The case of Dahmer is quite troubling to me as mesh theories seem quite sound until considering this case. We do seem to act against our instinctual desires by virtue of some sort of secondary decision making process. This could explain what an FO and SO are. An FO is the *instinctual desire* while the SO is the *decision-making process to act.* In the case of Dahmer, then, he had an instinctual desire to kill, but his decision-making process conflicted with it.

This may be the heart of the problem with mesh theories. It is not whether an agent's FO's and SO's mesh, but whether they act according to the SO, or their decision-making process to act. Everyone holds FO's they curtail with their SO's. I have an FO to not go to work most days, but my SO, my decision-making process to act, gets me out of bed and on the road. I can be held responsible if my SO was to not go to work or I acted against my SO in this way. The issue Frankfurt seems to have is in considering an FO as part of the equation for making judgments to act.

In other words, I agree that we have FO's (instinctual desires) and SO's (the decision-making process to act,) but it is only through acting according to the agents SO that praise or blame be assessed. If we look at whether the FO and SO mesh, Dahmer would be considered non-blameworthy for his FO and SO did not mesh. If we only look at SO's and consider whether their SO is in line with what we could consider blameworthy or praiseworthy, then Dahmer would be considered non-blameworthy for his actions. He didn't want to kill, so we can't hold him responsible. If we only look at his FO, then Dahmer could be blamed, but then we need to consider whether he was actually determined to do so or not. However, if we consider *acting* in line with his SO and what his SO was, then we can assess moral praise or blame readily.

Argument from Rational Acting

At this point, I would like to introduce my argument proposing that we ought to focus on acting in line with the agents SO when assessing moral praise or blame. I call this the **Argument for Rational Acting** because the SO is as previously suggested, the decision-making process to act. My argument is as follows:

(1) If an agent always considers a rational decision-making process, then they have acted according to, or against their judgment. (Basic)

(2) If they have acted according to, or against their judgment, then they can be held responsible for that judgment. (Basic)

(3) Therefore, if an agent always considers a rational decision-making process, then they can be held responsible for that judgment. (Hypothetical Syllogism 1, 2)

(4) Agents always consider a ration decision-making process. (Basic)

(5) Therefore, they can be held responsible for that judgment. (Modus ponens 3, 4)

In what follows, I will defend this basic argument. I will go through each premise explaining why I think it is so, while simultaneously looking at rebuttals to each premise pointing out why it does not merit disregard for my argument.

The first premise is that if an agent always considers a rational decision-making process, then they have acted according to, or against their judgment. I purposely leave out *best judgment* here because sometimes people act without much thought and judgement can be arrived at without much forethought. This is the main rebuttal to this premise, some do not act according to judgment, they just act. This is why I do not include a best judgment, as everyone makes a judgment, even if rash. No big decision, especially the likes of murder, should ever be arrived at through bad judgment.

The second premise is that if they acted according to, or against their judgment, then they can be held responsible for that judgment. This is to say that if someone makes a decision to act, and they act on that decision, this is the best means for assessing moral praise or blame. This premise can be seen as problematic because Dahmer, for example, acted against his judgment. Though, this is exactly the point. He did not act according to his judgment. His judgment was to not kill, he didn't want to, or so he says.

Yet, if that is the case, then he acted against his judgment and can be held responsible for not heeding reasons call in this situation.

This leads to the conclusion by hypothetical syllogism that if an agent always considers a rational decision-making process, then they can be held responsible for that judgment. The point here is that we always at least consider some rational decision-making process, even Dahmer. As he said he didn't want to do it. That was his rational decision-making process, or SO. Though, he acted against that judgment, which results in his being responsible as a cereal killer. If an agent acts according to their SO, and the SO is blameworthy, we can still assess moral responsibility that way too. Further, I have defended that we always consider a decision-making process. Thus all agents can be held responsible for their judgments. It is only through considering an agents decision-making process that we place blame or praise for their acts.

Works Cited

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