

Ginet's Argument Against Frankfurt Cases

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The Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP) states that someone can only be morally responsible for their actions if they could have done otherwise (Frankfurt 829). Through hypothetical cases, Frankfurt claims that PAP is false, or that someone does not need alternative possibilities to be morally responsible for their actions. These hypothetical situations are known as “Frankfurt cases.” Many philosophers, such as Carl Ginet, defend PAP by providing certain dilemmas that Frankfurt cases fall into. However, Ginet's dilemma is invalid because of problems with its conditions; additionally, the Frankfurt case-maker easily evades the dilemma by simply expanding their example. I will first expand on the concept of a Frankfurt case as well as Ginet's response to it. Following that, I will address the failure of two of Ginet's conditions and then move on to what I call the Expansion Problem.

Background

As mentioned earlier, PAP states that someone is morally responsible for their actions only if they could have acted otherwise (Frankfurt 829). Harry Frankfurt tries to prove that PAP is false with a concept that has

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come to be known as a Frankfurt case. The following is a common example of a Frankfurt case and will be used for the duration of the paper. Suppose Black wants Jones to kill Smith. Jones is already contemplating whether or not to kill Smith. Black thinks that Jones will kill Smith, but just to make sure Jones actually does, Black is prepared to force Jones to do so by whatever means necessary even if Jones decides not to kill Smith. If Jones decides to do it, however, Black doesn't need to interfere. Jones decides to kill Smith on his own and Black's hand is never needed.

Frankfurt claims that this case undermines PAP because Jones could not have done otherwise, yet is still morally responsible. Black's presence eliminates any option in which Jones could not have killed Smith (Frankfurt 836). Jones decides by his own volition to kill Smith, so the presence of Black meant nothing. Jones would have acted the same way even if Black wasn't forcing him to kill Smith—or in other words, if he had alternative options (836). To reinforce, imagine if Black was never involved in the murder of Smith. This doesn't seem to change anything about how Jones would have acted. The only difference is that Jones clearly had alternative options without Black there to force his hand if he had decided to not kill Smith. A situation where Black is absent makes PAP true. Thus, Frankfurt claims that Black's presence is null, or doesn't rid Jones of moral responsibility because he—without alternative options—still acted as if PAP had held (836). Black's presence being null in Frankfurt-style scenarios is why one may attribute some moral responsibility to Jones.

Carl Ginet finds Frankfurt's attack on PAP unconvincing (403). First, he establishes that—in our scenario of a Frankfurt case—Black must want Smith killed by a certain time and that he will interfere only if Jones hasn't decided to kill Smith by that time (Ginet 405). Because of this, Ginet argues that there must be a deterministic sign that Black can observe to assess whether or not he needs to interfere (408). The sign could be something as simple as Jones winking. If the sign occurs, Black does not need to do anything because the sign is causally sufficient to ensure Jones will kill Smith. If the sign never occurs, Black knows he needs to interfere and force Jones to kill Smith.

For Ginet, this brings up a two horned dilemma about Jones' morality that is contingent on whether three conditions about Jones' situation in regards to the deterministic sign are true or not: (A) Jones could have prevented the sign, (B) Jones knew how he could have prevented the sign, and (C) Jones knew that if the sign were to take place then his killing of Jones would be unpreventable (Ginet 408). The first horn of the dilemma arises when any one of the three conditions are false. If (A) is not met, then Jones could have never avoided the sign and is not morally responsible (Ginet 409). If (B) or (C) are not true then Jones could not have known how

to avoid the deterministic sign or he could not have known that he would be unable to avoid killing Smith at the time when the sign takes place (408–409). According to Ginet, if any one of three conditions are false, then Frankfurt's argument begs the question (409), because Frankfurt intended to show that the only thing that is forcing Jones to not be able to do otherwise is Black (Frankfurt 836). However, without Black, Jones could still not have avoided killing Smith if any of the three conditions are not met (Ginet 408). So, according to Ginet, the argument begs the question because even without Black's presence, Jones could still have not done otherwise and is said to be morally responsible, which is what a Frankfurt case is trying to show in the first place (409).

Now for the second part of the dilemma, suppose (A), (B), and (C) are all met. In this case, Jones is not responsible for killing Smith—because he would have been forced to do that anyway—but instead allowing the deterministic sign to take place when he had options to avoid it (Ginet 408). Because he could have avoided the sign, knew how to avoid it, and knew what the sign meant if it were to take place, Jones is responsible for letting the sign occur, not for killing Smith. In this case, PAP is still true. So, the first part of the dilemma is if any one of the conditions is not met, Frankfurt cases assume that moral responsibility does not require alternative possibilities, which is the very thing the Frankfurt case is trying to prove (Ginet 409). The second part of the dilemma is that if the conditions that are stated above are all met, Jones at some other point had alternative options and is responsible for them (Ginet 409). Therefore, PAP still holds true (Ginet 409).

The Problem with Condition (A)

Ginet has a fundamentally flawed condition: Condition (A) begs the question. When Ginet is about to reveal his three conditions, he asks “What can Jones be responsible for here?” (408). He then states that Jones' moral responsibility depends upon three conditions, meaning that if one of them is false, Jones is no longer morally responsible (408). Condition (A) says that the sign was preventable. However, to say that the sign is preventable is to say that there are alternative options. So, if Jones' moral responsibility hinges on alternate possibilities, then Ginet's dilemma begs the question. He states that the only way Jones can be morally responsible is if he has alternate possibilities, but this is exactly the topic of debate in a Frankfurt case (Ginet 408). Frankfurt's purpose is to show that PAP is false, meaning that a person can be morally responsible without alternate options (829). When Ginet makes it a requirement that Jones have alternate possibilities

to be morally responsible, he is essentially saying that Frankfurt is wrong because it is a requirement of being morally responsible to have alternate possibilities. It would be the same situation if Ginet were trying to prove that a duck is only a duck if it has two feet, but his premises stated that for a duck to be a duck, three conditions must be met: (1) it has two feet, (2) it quacks and (3) the thing in question is an omnivore. Therefore, a duck has two feet. There is clearly something wrong with this argument, no matter how grossly it understates the requirements for something to be a duck. Ginet, therefore, is begging the question by assuming that moral responsibility requires alternate possibilities.

An objection to the interpretation of Condition (A) is to say that having alternative options is not the same as something being preventable. However, the only way some action is preventable is if there are other options besides the one that is trying to be avoided. For example, if the only option available to mankind is to hunt ducks, then that is the only thing mankind can do, so it is impossible to prevent duck-hunting. However, if it is possible that duck-hunting can be prevented, then there must be some other option. Whether that option is hunting geese or not hunting altogether makes no difference; there must be another option and, therefore, Ginet still fails to avoid the same trap of begging the question he claims Frankfurt has fallen into: he asserts his desired conclusion that moral responsibility requires alternate options in the premises of the argument.

The Problem with Condition (C)

Along with Condition (A), Condition (C) is also flawed: Condition (C) does not beg the question if it is false because it does not force the deterministic sign to occur, and thus doesn't force Jones' killing of Smith, although Ginet claims it does (408–409). So, Jones could not have avoided killing Smith even without Black's presence, which makes Frankfurt assume moral responsibility without alternative options, according to Ginet (409). However, there is no reason to believe that Jones could not have avoided killing Smith if (C) is false. Condition (C), if false, only says that Jones does not know that it would be impossible to avoid killing Smith once the sign takes place. Presumably, this sign is something that applies to the situation (Ginet does not give an example of what the sign could be). A realistic sign would be something like Jones getting in his car to kill Smith. Now, if (A) and (B) are both true, then Jones can prevent the sign and knows how to prevent it. And certainly Jones knows he is on his way to kill Smith. The only thing Jones does not know is that now, because he has gotten in his car, he cannot *avoid* killing Smith. However, in no way

does this seem to contribute to forcing Jones to make that decision to get into the car. Another example may help illustrate this point.

A man with a drinking problem knows how to avoid a bar and his being at a bar is avoidable in the first place. However, he does not avoid being at the bar and unbeknownst to him, his presence at the bar will *force* him to drink. A tragic tale comes to pass: the struggling addict ends up at the bar and drinks. Now, who does the man have to blame? He knew he could have avoided the bar, his presence at the bar was avoidable in the first place, and so he has no one to blame but himself. He could blame the cosmic universe for making it unavoidable for him to drink once he was at the bar, but, more realistically, he realizes that he must make better choices in the future to avoid drinking. In other words, the drinking man accepts that he made the wrong choice to be at the bar and accepts that he could have—and should have—avoided being there.

The example of the man with the drinking problem is, in all the most important aspects, identical to Ginet's conditional sign. Because it is fairly clear that the man with the drinking problem could have avoided the sign and, by extension, avoid drinking, even though condition (C) wasn't true, it must be accepted that Frankfurt's example does not beg the question if (C) doesn't hold because it also does not force the sign to occur. Ginet attempts to show that if (C) does not hold then Jones could not have avoided the sign taking place in the first place, however, because of the drinking man example, we can still claim Jones could have avoided that decision to get in his car to kill Smith (408–409). This is because the sign must have been related to the event in the first place. If the sign is related to the event (like the bar clearly being related to the act of drinking), Jones must have had some knowledge about the two events.

One may say that the sign does not need to be something as obvious as getting in the car; it could be plausible that the sign is something like this: once Jones is three miles away from Smith's location, it becomes impossible for Jones to avoid killing him. In this case, Jones would have no way of knowing that the sign is related to killing Smith at all. However, it must still be necessary that the sign takes place *after* the decision to kill Smith, because Frankfurt says Jones must make the decision for his own reasons and, by extension, not by some cosmic chance that Jones ends up within three miles of Smith's house and is now forced to kill him (836). The response to the objection, then, is that even if the sign was not discernible to Jones, he was still aware of his decision to kill Smith. Going back to our example of the drinking man, maybe it was the case that the point of no return was when he was ten feet from the bar, or when he tapped his foot three times on the floor of the bar. However, the alcoholic still decided to go to the bar. For the Frankfurt case, even if

the sign is in no way connected, Jones had to make some decision to go and kill Smith. The killing of Smith was certainly no accident. As stated above, Frankfurt makes it clear that Jones decided for his own reasons to kill Smith (836). Therefore, Jones had to be aware of what he was doing. If the sign is that once Jones is three miles away from Smith's position, he could have avoided being there by not ever getting in the car to go kill Smith. Thus, this objection fails because even if the sign was something as obscure as being three miles from Smith's house, Jones still knew what was happening because he decided for his own reasons to kill Smith and so could have avoided the sign by choosing to never make the decision to go to Smith's house.

Ginet's Expansion Problem

The final problem with Ginet's dilemma is what I have called the Expansion Problem. David Hunt proposed something similar in regard to his own paper, which I have taken inspiration from (141). Hunt's version of the Expansion Problem deals with the intricacies of his argument, while what I am suggesting is related to mine. While the other two problems posed to Ginet's dilemma are focused on the problems with his conditions, the Expansion Problem deals with his conditions in an indirect way. The Expansion Problem is that the Frankfurt case-maker can expand Black's influence to relate to previous alternative options. This Expansion Problem is tailored specifically towards Ginet's dilemma and its conditions.

As has been mentioned before, Ginet's three conditions deal with the nature of the sign. Ginet, however, does not apply the conditions to the actual act of killing Smith; he only applies the conditions to the sign that precedes the murder. Here, we need a brief recap of the Frankfurt case. Smith is debating about whether to kill Smith. Black wants him to kill Smith and if Jones decides not to kill Smith, Black will then force him to kill Smith. Because of this, Jones lacks alternative options. However, he decides to kill Smith for his own reasons and Black's interference is never needed. Ginet says that if Conditions (A), (B), and (C) are met, then Jones is to be blamed for allowing the sign to take place, which forces him to kill Jones, not the actual act of killing Smith because he could not have avoided that, making PAP true (408). However, Frankfurt could expand Black's influence to include the decision to allow the sign to take place. Now, the Frankfurt case says that Black will force the sign to take place if Jones does not do it on his own, but Jones still does it on his own. Essentially, Black's elimination of alternative options for Jones has been expanded to farther back in Jones' timeline. This is possible because

Ginet's conditions only relate to when Black is not interfering. Ginet gives the conditions to show that PAP still held before Black was planning to interfere, so the conditions in no way prohibit the Frankfurt case-maker to extend his example farther back in Jones' timeline (409). This expansion of Black's influence makes Ginet's conditions arbitrary.

Ginet may propose that his conditions could be applied to a sign that now guarantees that the old sign in question would take place, but then we could expand the Frankfurt case again to include *that* sign and so on and so forth. Essentially, the nature of Ginet's rebuttal against Frankfurt provokes Frankfurt to expand the case so Black has always had a presence in Jones' life. It just so happens that Jones makes all the decisions that are necessary to kill Smith on his own and Black never needs to interfere.

Another possible objection is that Ginet could apply his three conditions to the actual decision to kill Smith as an attempt to solve the Expansion Problem. However, Condition (A) states that the sign (or in this sense, the act of deciding to kill Smith) is preventable. This gives Jones an alternative option to not kill Smith. However, the point of the Frankfurt case is to show that if Jones were to decide *not* to kill Smith, Black would force him to do so. Black's presence eliminates alternative options besides deciding to kill Smith. Condition (A) would now make it so that the decision not to kill Smith is an option. So, Condition (A) doesn't make sense if applied to the actual decision of killing Smith because it gives alternate options to Jones, which violates the conditions of the Frankfurt case.

Condition (B) would not make sense if applied to the original Frankfurt case either because Black's presence makes it impossible to avoid the decision to kill Smith; Jones' moral responsibility without alternative options is in question, not whether he knew how to prevent an action that was impossible to prevent from occurring (itself a nonsensical statement). So, Condition (B) also does not make sense if applied to the actual decision to kill Smith.

Finally, Condition (C) does not fix the Expansion Problem if applied to the original Frankfurt case. Condition (C), if applied to the action of deciding to kill Smith, would say something like "Jones knew that once he decided to kill Smith, he would not be able to avoid killing Smith." If this is meant to fix the Expansion Problem, it is not clear why it would. The Frankfurt case-maker is still in no way prohibited from expanding the Frankfurt case to earlier decisions in Jones' life because the new Condition (C) is an addition to Jones' knowledge about his decision to kill Smith. It does not add any restrictions to the Frankfurt case-maker except that Jones is now more aware of the magnitude of his decision. The Frankfurt case-maker can now just expand his example to earlier decisions and have Jones understand that once he makes a decision to do some action, that

action is unpreventable. Therefore, the Expansion Problem is still a valid approach. While (A) violates the Frankfurt case requirements and (B) just doesn't make sense, (C) does not fix the Expansion Problem at all because it still allows the Frankfurt case-maker to expand Black's influence to earlier in Jones' life. Because (A), (B), and (C) do not present valid objections if applied to the original Frankfurt case, making Ginet's conditions apply to the actual decision of killing Smith fails as an objection.

Conclusion

While Ginet does provide a dilemma to Frankfurt, the dilemma is invalid. Two of its conditions are flawed and the dilemma itself just begs the Frankfurt case-maker to expand the example to include other alternative options in the past. I am not stating that PAP is false and that Frankfurt is right. Instead, I am stating that Ginet's dilemma is an invalid approach to undermining Frankfurt's attack on PAP and he needs to modify his argument or present a better one to prove that Frankfurt does not disprove PAP.

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