Ethics // Spring 2023

Handout 16

Responsibility: Frankfurt

The story of Leontius. Plato narrates the following story in the *Republic*:

> Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner's feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses, saying, 'Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!' (439e-440a)

Plato himself took the story to imply that there are two parts of the soul, the appetitive and the emotional. Leontius was satisfied appetitively (physically), but frustrated emotionally. Missing from his account is the apparent hierarchical structure of the soul: some desires may have as their objects other desires. Another useful question to ask is: was Leontius *freely* looking at the corpses?

Personhood. Animals may well have some intentional attitudes, such as desires. But the object of their attitudes is never a desire itself. People alone are able to have second-order desires whose object is another desire. 12

Wanting. Frankfurt observes that 'A wants to ϕ' is compatible with quite different situations. For example:

(16-1) A wants to ϕ and

a. The prospect of ϕ-ing leaves A cold.
b. A is unaware of wanting to ϕ.
c. A believes that he does not want to ϕ.
d. A wants positively to not-ϕ!
e. A does not *really* want to ϕ.

Therefore, when we say merely that A wants to ϕ, we do not distinguish among these possible situations. However, sometimes we do mean that the person's desire is an 'effective' one and will determine his motivation. 14

Desires and will. 'X wants to ϕ' sometimes can mean that:

(16-2) The governing motive of X's current action is the desire to ϕ.

For example, you observe Ron brushing his teeth. Ron on this occasion may have many desires, such as the desire to read before sleep. But the desire that governs Ron in brushing his teeth is the desire to keep his teeth clean. In this case, Frankfurt talks about Ron's *will* to keep his teeth clean. So the agent's will is identical with one of the agent's first-order desires. More specifically, it is identical with a first-order effective desire which propels the agent to the current action.

Relation between second-order desires and will. The psychotherapist case: the agent may desire to have a desire for taking drugs. At the same time he may also desire that desire not to be effective (he does not want to actually take a drug). On the other hand: a police informant who is sent to spy on drug dealers may in fact want to be so convincing as an addict, that he would want to have all the effective desires of a drug addict. In this case the informant has a *second-order volition*. 14 16

Wantons and persons. A creature may have plenty of first-order desires, but none of the second-order volitions. This is the case of some animals, but also of those humans who 'go with the flow': they are unable to commit to ('invest in') any particular desire. Such creatures are *wantons*. A real person must have second-order volitions. 16

Remark 1 (Wanton). The etymology of 'wanton' has an unobvious relation to 'want'. OED tells us that it is 'wan-ton', meaning literally 'un-governed'.

As Frankfurt emphasises, wantons may be rational. We should not portray them, as Plato perhaps did, as irrational. They may be able to deliberate, yet their deliberation would be purely instrumental. It would not be concerned with the desirability of first-order desires. Rationality is not a sufficient, but a necessary condition of personhood. In order to control and judge your first-order desires you need reason.

Freedom. According to one view (e.g. Hobbes, Hume), *X* is free only when *X* can *do* what he wants. Thus we can attribute freedom of action to a dog when that dog can run in whatever direction it wants. So in one sense that dog is free. But there is another notion of freedom (already in Plato), that of freedom of the will. *X* has free will only if *X* can *want* what he wants. That is, the first-order desires he has are the ones determined by his second-order volitions.

Question 2. Why does Frankfurt say that the notion of an agent who does what he wants to do is ' by no means clear '?

Question 3. How can we describe the conflict between an agent's second-order volitions?

Question 4. Why is it valuable to have freedom of the will?

Moral responsibility. What notion of responsibility emerges from this discussion? Perhaps this:

(16-3) *X* is morally responsible only when *X* acts out of his own free will.

However, *X* might not be free to have the will he actually has. Suppose Black wants Jones to brush his teeth. Suppose Jones actually decides, on his own, to brush his teeth. Well, he acted freely and is morally responsible for brushing his teeth. And this is so despite the fact that Jones was *not* free to choose his desire of teeth brushing: for, as we know, had he not decided to brush his teeth, Black would have intervened and made him want to brush his teeth.

Possible objections. Frankfurt's view has the implication that the agent ' identifies ' himself with his second-order volition. But one might ask why the mere fact of action and will conforming to one of the desires elevates this desire to something like the person's character. It seems that the second-order volition cannot simply be one of the many desires the persons happens to have. Another implication is that the agent, in his practical deliberation, is focussing on which first-order desire to make effective. Yet normally, we focus on the course of action, not on our own desires.

Question 5. Can we be wantons with regard to our second-order volitions? If we can, what is the implication for Frankfurt's view?

Question 6. Go back to the story of Leontius. Narrate it in the terms of Frankfurt's theory.

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