

A New Counterexample to Principles of Alternative Possibilities

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- (PAP) Necessarily: for any person S and any action A, S is morally responsible for performing A only if there is some action A* such that S could have done A* while failing to do A.

Warm Up: Frankfurt-Style Counterexample

Jones is deliberating about whether to kill Smith and Black wants Smith to be dead as well. Black implants a mind control device into Jones's head. The device is made to detect whether or not Jones will go through with the killing of Smith. If the device were to detect that Jones will not go through with the killing, then a mind control mechanism would be activated, which would take over Jones's decision making process and thereby set Jones on a path toward carrying out the killing anyway. On the other hand, if the device were to detect that Jones will carry through with the killing, then the mind control mechanism would remain inert. After some period of deliberation, Jones decides to kill Smith and the mind control mechanism remains inert.

The Frankfurt Case against (PAP)

In this example, Jones is morally responsible for killing Smith. Moreover, Jones could not have done any action *while failing to kill Smith*. So, (PAP) is false.

Weak Objection: Jones could have done otherwise because the mind control device might have malfunctioned.

Response: Possibilities in which the mind control device malfunctions are distant possibilities. These distant possibilities do not ground Jones's ability to do otherwise.

Stronger Objection: Jones in fact could have done otherwise than kill Smith even though nothing he could have done would have allowed for Smith's survival. Even though Jones could not avoid bodily movements that result in Smith's death, he could have done otherwise than *kill* Smith by ensuring that those bodily movements do not constitute an *act* of killing.

Time Travel Counterexample:

Martin is a time traveler. During one of his many trips through time, Martin rescued high-wire walker from plummeting to his death. Martin arrived in his machine just in time to see the man fall from his wire, head first toward the ground. Luckily, Martin pressed an emergency safety net release button and an emergency safety net was deployed across the field underneath the high-wire walker. The walker landed safely in the net and walked away from the situation unscathed. If Martin had not pushed the button and released the emergency safety net, then the high-wire walker would have fallen to his death. As it turns out, this high-wire walker was Martin's grandfather at a very young age. At the time of his fall, Martin's high-wire walking grandfather had not yet met Martin's grandmother and he had not done anything that would have preserved his gametes for posterity

The Time Travel Case against (PAP)

In this example, Martin is morally responsible for releasing the emergency safety net. Moreover, Martin could not have *done* any action while failing to release the emergency safety net. So, (PAP) is false.

Argument for the claim that Martin could not do otherwise:

- (1) If Martin had not released the emergency safety net, then Martin would have never existed.
- (2) It's not possible for Martin to *do* otherwise than release the emergency safety net if he never exists.
- (3) If Martin had not released the emergency safety net, then he would not have done otherwise than release the emergency safety net. [(1) and (2)]
- (4) It is possible that Martin does not release the emergency safety net.
- (5) It is not the case that if Martin had not released the safety net, then he would have done otherwise. [(3) and (4)]
- (6) If Martin could have done otherwise than release the safety net, then if he had not released the safety net, he would have done otherwise than release the safety net.
- (7) Martin could not have done otherwise than release the safety net. [(5) and (6)]¹

One Advantage of this counterexample is that it is immune to any objection like the Stronger Objection to Frankfurt-Style Counterexamples. The Stronger Objection, relied on the claim that Jones exists in the counterfactual scenarios and does otherwise than kill Smith by ensuring that his bodily movements don't constitute an *act* of killing. But, in the time travel counterexample, Martin does not even exist in the counterfactual scenario. So, he can't *do* anything. In particular, he cannot *do* otherwise than release the emergency safety net. This distinction between *acts* and *mere bodily movements* just doesn't help here.

¹ This argument is counterfactually valid. Let 'O' stand for the proposition that Martin does otherwise than release the safety net, let 'E' stand for the proposition that Martin exists at some time or other, and let 'R' stand for the proposition that he does release the safety net. Finally, if we let '◊' stand for 'it is possible that...' and '◊_m' stand for 'Martin can make it such that...', then we can formulate a formal version of this argument as follows:

- (1) $(\sim R \Box \rightarrow \sim E)$
- (2) $\Box(\sim E \rightarrow \sim O)$
- So, (3) $(\sim R \Box \rightarrow \sim O)$ [from (1) and (2)]
- (4) $\Diamond \sim R$
- So, (5) $\sim(\sim R \Box \rightarrow O)$ [from (3) and (4)]
- (6) $\Diamond_m O \rightarrow (\sim R \Box \rightarrow O)$
- So, (7) $\sim \Diamond_m O$ [from (5) and (6)]

The inference from (3) and (4) to (5) is needed to rule out that (3) is vacuously true. If (3) is vacuously true, then (5) is the denial of a vacuous true and, hence, clearly false. But, of course, if (4) is true, then (3) is not vacuous and (5) is true as well.

Objections to Premise (1):

Objection 1: Martin could have refrained from releasing the safety net because something else might have saved his grandfather. If something else had saved his grandfather, then Martin still would have existed. So, premise (1) is false

Response 1: We can stipulate that no one else is around to save the grandfather and we will still have a possible scenario (and hence a counterexample). Moreover, even if there are distant possibilities in which Martin's grandfather is saved, these distant possibilities do not ground Smith's ability to do otherwise than save his grandfather.

Objection 2: Premise (1) presupposes the Necessity of Origins. But, the Necessity of Origins is false. So, premise (1) is false as well.

Response 2: Premise (1) does *not* presuppose the Necessity of Origins. All we need to support (1) is that Martin's existence counterfactual depends on his grandfather's survival.

Objection 3: Branching time is possible. Premise (1) is false because Martin can refrain from releasing the emergency safety net and continue to exist on an alternative time line.

Response 3: Objection (3) is successful only if branching time is *necessary*. But, branching time is not necessary. Whether time can branch or not depends on the laws of nature.

Contextualist Objection:

Grandfather Paradox:

- (A) If time travel is possible, then Tim can kill his grandfather before his grandfather has any children.
- (B) Tim cannot kill his grandfather before his grandfather has any children.
- (C) Time travel is possible.

Martin's Grandfather Paradox:

- (A) If time travel is possible, then Martin could have done otherwise than save his grandfather before his grandfather has any children.
- (B) Martin could not have done otherwise than save his grandfather before his grandfather has any children
- (C) Time travel is possible.

(LAC) Any English sentence of the form 'S can do A' expresses a truth in context C iff S's doing A is consistent with the facts that are salient in C.

Contextualist Objection: If (LAC) is true, then either the sentence next to '(1)' expresses a falsehood in some contexts or the sentence next to '(6)' expresses a falsehood in some contexts.

Response: If (PAP) is true, then the sentence “Martin is morally responsible for releasing the safety net only if Martin can do otherwise than release the safety net” expresses a truth in every context. But, according to the contextualist defense of (PAP), “Martin can do otherwise than release the safety net” expresses a falsehood in some contexts. It follows that “Martin is morally responsible for releasing the safety net” also expresses a falsehood in some contexts. But, that sentence does not express a falsehood in any context.

Extending the Counterexample:

(SPAP) Necessarily: for any person S and any fully determinate action A, S is morally responsible for performing A only if there is some fully determinate action A* such that S could have done A* while failing to do A.

(SPAP) is immune to Frankfurt-Style Counterexamples. But is it immune from Time Travel Counterexamples?

Let’s suppose that Martin first found his time machine abandoned in a field. The machine had been built by a race of extremely powerful beings who constructed a rather intricate locking mechanism in the device. The locking mechanism prevented the machine from being activated unless a particular fully determinate event occurred at some time in the past. That fully determinate event was the event of Martin’s pushing the button to release the emergency safety net in the particular way he did. If, in the past, Martin had not pushed the button in the particular way he did, if, in other words, he had not performed the particular fully determinate action that he actually performed, then the time travel machine would have remained locked forever, no one would have been able to use it to travel in time, Martin’s grandfather would have plummeted to his death in the desolate wilderness and Martin would never have existed. But, of course, if Martin had not existed, then he would not have been able to *do* any fully determinate action; in particular, he would not have been able to do any fully determinate action different from his actual action.