

Widerker, David and Michael McKenna (eds.), *Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities: Essays on the Importance of Alternative Possibilities* (Aldershot, England, Ashgate Publishing Limited), pp. 364, US\$89.95.

Review by Kevin Timpe

Open any book on contemporary epistemology and one will likely find treatment of Gettier cases. The field, at large, seems smitten with developing and responding to ever more complex Gettier cases. The same is true in action theory with regard to treatment of free will/moral responsibility and Harry Frankfurt's ingenious counterexample to the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (hereafter, *PAP*). Indeed, Frankfurt's counter-factual intervener Black and his cousins enjoy a popularity that rivals Mr. Nogot's fame. In *Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities: Essays on the Importance of Alternative Possibilities*, editors David Widerker and Michael McKenna bring together 17 essays, plus some insightful concluding remarks by Frankfurt himself, on Frankfurt-style counterexamples (hereafter, *FSCs*) and the debate over alternative possibilities. The focus of the present volume is narrower than other recent anthologies on free will, such as the *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, but it explores the issues it does cover with extraordinary depth. The contributions to the present volume all, to some degree or other, discuss the purported success of *FSCs* in showing *PAP* to be false. Contributors include Harry Frankfurt, John Martin Fischer, David Widerker, Carl Ginet, Robert Kane, Bernard Berofsky, Alfred Mele, David Robb, Eleonore Stump, David Hunt, Derk Pereboom, Michael McKenna, William Rowe, David Copp, Michael Zimmerman, and Charlotte Katzoff. A number of the essays contained in this volume, such as Frankfurt's own article which initiated the current debate over alternative possibilities, have been previously published. Most, however, appear here either for the first time or in an expanded and modified form.

As Frankfurt himself notes, in recent years *FSCs* have become "disconcertingly intricate" (339), and the current volume contains some of the most complex *FSCs* developed to date. Despite their complexity, at the heart of an *FSC* is what has come to be called an *IRR*-situation. An *IRR*-situation is one that makes it impossible for a person to avoid performing a certain action, but in no way brings it about that that he performs

that action. If, it is claimed, *FSCs* are indeed *IRR*-situations, then they will show *PAP* to be false. However, there is significant disagreement over whether *FSCs* really are *IRR*-situations. This volume evidences the degree of that disagreement.

Perhaps the two main strategies for rejecting the efficacy of *FSCs* in showing the falsity of *PAP* are the flicker-of-freedom strategy and what the editors call the *prior-sign dilemma defense*. The flicker-of-freedom strategy argues that *FSCs* are not *IRR*-situations by finding remaining alternative possibilities that might be morally relevant. The editors “do not believe that the flicker defense is fruitful” (8), and, other than Fischer’s introduction of the strategy from his *Metaphysics of Free Will*, articles devoted specifically to this strategy are notably absent from this volume. Perhaps some of this is due to Frankfurt’s own evaluation of the flicker strategy: “The pertinence of the kinds of situations I have proposed as counterexamples to *PAP* does not depend upon supposing that the agents in those examples have no alternatives at all. Attempts to locate some sort of alternative in them are, in my view, beside the point. If the agent acts for reasons of his own, in other words, it is irrelevant whether or not his situation includes a flicker of freedom” (1999, 370). Nevertheless, many of the essays do indirectly deal with the flicker strategy by exploring what would have to be true of alternative possibilities in order for them to be ‘robust’ alternatives (for example, the contributions by Kane, Pereboom, Widerker, McKenna, Zimmerman).

Many of the articles in the present volume directly engage the second strategy for responding to *FSCs*, i.e., the *prior-sign dilemma defense*. In typical *FSCs*, the counterfactual intervener looks to the presence or absence of a prior-sign in order to know if he should intervene or not. For example, if the agent blushes at t_1 if and only if he will decide to do action A at t_2 , then the intervener can know whether he needs to intervene in order to guarantee that the agent does A based on whether the agent blushes or not. In response, the *prior-sign dilemma defense* argues as follows: either the relationship between the prior-sign and the action in an *FSC* is deterministic or it is not. Either way, however, *FSCs* fail to refute *PAP*. If the relationship between the prior-sign and the action is deterministic, then the *PAP*-defender can claim that the agent is not morally responsible, since something for which she was not morally responsible (namely, the prior-sign) is nomically sufficient for her action. On the other hand, if the relation

between the prior-sign and the action is not deterministic, then it would still be possible for the agent to do otherwise even after she showed the relevant sign. A number of the articles develop this defense and apply it to recent *FSCs* (for example, see the editors' introduction and the contributions by Widerker, Ginet, Kane), while others attempt to develop *FSCs* that avoid both horns of this dilemma (see the contribution by Pereboom, Mele and Robb, Stump). The discussion of these latest generation *FSCs* involving, for example, blockage is among the most technical material in the volume and some degree of familiarity with the debate will be useful for readers.

One way to avoid both horns of the *prior-sign dilemma* is by developing *FSCs* that do not involve a prior-sign. For example, Stump's contribution contains two no-prior-sign cases, one based on the possibility of middle knowledge and another based on the correlation between volitions and neural firings in the philosophy of mind. (Rowe also briefly considers a Molinist-inspired *FSC* in his contribution) These examples show that the presence of a prior-sign is not essential to *FSCs*. If such a case can be developed, then the *prior-sign dilemma defense* can be easily avoided (a similar conclusion is reached in Timpe (forthcoming) and Bergmann (2002)). Despite such *FSCs* that do not involve a prior-sign, much of the present volume focuses on the *prior-sign dilemma defense*. In fact, one contributor suggests that the debate over the success of the *FSCs* just "is the debate over whether it is possible to get around the excellent point made by those incompatibilists defending the [*prior-sign dilemma*]" (McKenna, 205). If the no-prior-sign cases are cogent, as I believe they are, such an evaluation of the debate will be false.

A further benefit of the no-prior-sign cases is that they also avoid Ginet's objection (77f) that *FSCs* necessarily involve a temporal discrepancy between the actual and alternate sequences and that, as a result of this feature, there is still something for which an agent in an *FSC* is morally responsible. According to Ginet, even if the agent in an *FSC* is not morally responsible for doing some action *A* by time t_2 (given the presence of an intervener who is sufficient for *A* occurring by t_2), she still could be morally responsible for doing *A* by t_1 . Thus, the "finding as to what Jones is and is not responsible for depends on there being a difference between the time at which Jones actually does *B* and the time at which Jones would do *B* if he were caused to do it by

Black's mechanism" (79). Though Ginet's response is specifically addressed to an argument given by Mele and Robb originally published in (1998) and defended in their contribution to this volume, Ginet presumably thinks it also applies to all *FSCs* (79ff). However, if no-prior sign cases such as Stump's are coherent, then Ginet's objection will also fail.

One of the greatest strengths of this volume is the recognition by many its contributors of the need to locate the debate surrounding *FSCs* within larger metaphysical discussions, such as the discussion of causation in general. Berofsky, for example, considers the possibility that an *FSC* can be based on trumping preemption, but suggests that trumping is not a form of preemption; it is rather a case of overdetermination. Hunt, Mele and Robb advocate *FSCs* based on blockage, where all alternative possibilities other than that pertaining to what the agent does in the actual sequence are blocked. They attempt to show how blockage cases do not involve determination, but admit this depends on one's account of the nature of causation, namely whether it is simply counterfactual dependence or something richer, such as a real, non-reductive relation. Dealing with the relationship between blockage and determination, Mele and Robb admit that "perhaps the primary disagreement between us and our objectors is over an issue in the metaphysics of causality" (130). Along a similar line, when discussing blockage cases, Hunt considers the objection that by eliminating all alternatives, blockage cases make it that the result that happens in the actual sequence is the only result causally possible. "But then every state or event of possible relevance to Jones's exercise of agency is causally determined by the device, leaving no opening for the causal indeterminism critical to libertarianism" (172). A complete reply to this objection, according to Hunt, "requires a pretty solid grip on the notion of an actual sequence" and "this is a large and important subject which cannot be pursued adequately here" (173). As these brief remarks suggest, the present volume does help to locate the debate over *FSCs* within the context of larger metaphysical issues, even if it does not do this to the extent that some would like.

Perhaps of greatest interest is Frankfurt's own concluding contribution to this volume, where he reflects on the state of the debate that he began. Frankfurt thinks that much of the debate, and—it would seem—a great many of the essays in this volume,

have missed the “most essential point” of *FSCs* by focusing on whether or not they really are *IRR* scenarios: “the usefulness of the examples ... does not really depend upon supposing that they describe circumstances that actually make an action altogether unavoidable while playing no role in bringing the action about. The examples effectively undermine the appeal of *PAP* even if it is true that circumstances that do not bring an action about invariably leave open the possibility that the action might not be performed” (339). *FSCs* do this by showing that making an action unavoidable is conceptually distinguished from bringing it about that the action is performed. The appreciation of this distinction, Frankfurt thinks, “tends to liberate us from the natural but nonetheless erroneous supposition that it is proper to regard people as morally responsible for what they have done only if they could have done otherwise” (340) and can do so even if *FSCs* fail to show the unavoidability of the action in question. Frankfurt admits that he has not always been clear that this is the point at issue (footnote 2, 344). What is most important is not whether an *FSC* really is an *IRR* situation, or even if such situations are possible; rather, Frankfurt thinks, the crucial issue is only how the action came to be performed.

Of course, many incompatibilists agree with the claim that the actual sequence is what matters for attributions of moral responsibility. Where these incompatibilists disagree with Frankfurt is that they also believe that indeterminism must be part of the actual history that led to the action if the agent is to be morally responsible for it. For this reason, the debate between incompatibilists and compatibilists will continue despite the present volume. Nevertheless, *Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities* is a welcome contribution to this debate and will be of interest to those concerned with issues surrounding free will and moral responsibility.

Works Cited

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