



Essential Philosophy with Dr. David Schenk

Lesson 23: Frankfurt's Theory of Action

Outline:

Review: Plato's three elements of the human person:

- Reason
- Will
- Desires/Appetites
- Injustice and unhappiness are caused by internal wars between reason and appetites within a person.

Harry Frankfurt's Theory of Action.

- Preliminary Definitions:
 - **Desire:** any kind of impulse to action
 - **First order desire:** direct impulse or craving of something
 - *example:* I desire to eat some ice cream.
 - **Second order desire:** the desire to feel a particular desire for something, an indirect or meta-level desire.
 - *example:* I want to know what it's like to desire to eat ice cream; I desire to feel what it's like to desire same the things my spouse desires.
 - **Will:** any desire that you act on.
 - *example:* To not merely desire a cheeseburger but to desire, buy and eat a cheeseburger.
 - **Second Order Volition:** the desire to have conscious control over which desires you have and act on. The desire to desire something.
 - *example:* I wish that I could enjoy this statistics homework, but it doesn't interest me at all. I wish that I could complete this homework out of interest in the subject matter, but I'm only capable of doing it out of fear of a bad grade.
 - **Wanton:** a mere creature who does not have second order volitions. Wantons may have desires and be capable of mathematical processes such as counting. However, they are incapable of reflecting on their own lives and desires.
 - *example:* A dog, a crow, or an elephant.
 - **Person:** a creature who is capable of second order volitions. Persons reflect on their own lives and wish that they desired different things than the things they actually desire.
 - *example:* A smoker who wishes that he could quit smoking, but can't stop craving more nicotine.



Frankfurt's Theory of Action (14:53)

Free Action: the ability to do what you want or act on your desires.

Genuine Free Will: acting according to second order volitions. Choosing to live one's life according to certain desires rather than others. Reflective self-governance. One's will is truly free only inasmuch as one acts according to second order volitions. Only a person is capable of free will, since wantons are not capable of second order volitions.

example: When a person chooses to act on the weaker desire to tell the truth about a mistake they made rather than tell a convenient lie.

- Stop here for the brief version; continue on for a more expansive description of Frankfurt's view (18:10).

Implications of Frankfurt's View for Moral Responsibility (18:58)

1. The conditions for moral responsibility do not require free will, but merely rational will.

2. **Rational Will:** one's will corresponds with/is consistent with one's second order volitions. One's second order volitions do not have to be in control of one's will in order for it to be a rational will. For instance, one might do the right thing just because of a guttural impulse to do so and not because of second order volitions governing one's impulses.

example: A workaholic might work constantly because of an urge that she can't control. This workaholic might also have a second order volition to work diligently around the clock.

Therefore, even though working constantly is consistent with her second order volition to be diligent, the second order volition itself is not what causes her to work all the time. Thus she has a rational, but not a free will in this scenario.

- **Objections:**
 - Couldn't someone be programmed or compelled to have a second order volition to act in a certain way. For example, could an individual be hypnotized to murder a neighbor out of a hate in a premeditated manner. If this is possible, then someone could be held morally responsible for a crime that they committed under hypnosis.



- Babies and small children are not persons according to Frankfurt, but wantons. This is inconsistent with Christian teaching about the value of children and human life.
- Don't addicts and those guilty of crimes of passion have some responsibility for their actions, even if their freedom is diminished? Under Frankfurt's account, such individuals are morally innocent since they aren't acting according to second order volitions.
- **Which Theory of Free Will is True?**
 - Schenk favors the *Theory of Agency* in large part because he agrees with a classical Aristotelian understanding of causation that thinks is superior to the contemporary concept of event-based causation employed in modern fields.
 - Endorsing a particular theory comes with a cost. The question is "which prices are payable and which ones are not?"