

The Discomfort in Frankfurt

Koen Schoenmakers

"The standards [...] of practical reason are grounded, so far as I can see, only in ourselves. More particularly, they are grounded only in what we cannot help caring about and cannot help considering important."

Harry Frankfurt in 'Getting it right', p. 190

Don't try to prove a Nazi wrong. (Discomfort of normative subjectivism)

The quote reported above makes some people very uncomfortable¹. These people believe that 'doing the right thing' is somehow grounded in something outside of us. Whether it is God, human rights or the undeniable law of reason, they claim something outside of us has to determine what is good. If not, would we not be able to justify anything? Are we then permitted to simply do whatever?

Of course, reality is indifferent to our comfort with it. If it were up to me, I would not choose to live on a planet which could at any moment be destroyed by an asteroid; I would choose not to have to die; I would choose to live in a world where people do not enslave one another. This would

be a much more comfortable world, yet reality does not seem to care.

When it comes to uncomfortable conclusions of astronomy, - an extinction-sized asteroid could at any point head in our direction - we accept it. When it comes to conclusions of medicine, - anyone can die of a stroke at any time - we accept it. Sure, we try to prevent these things; in fact practitioners and scientists do so every day. Still, we accept it. Upon learning about these things, we include them in our system of beliefs. No strings attached. But for some reason, when it comes to human actions, such as modern-day slavery, we do something odd. We acknowledge that this phenomenon exists, but in addition we claim that the people who inflict these crimes are wrong and mistaken. We include an additional existence into our belief system: the existence of objective reasons to act in a certain way.

This position is what is known as normative objectivism²: the idea that morality is grounded in something external to the individual person. According to normative

¹ Francis Beckwith, *Do the Right Thing: Readings in Applied Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002).

² Shin Kim, "Moral Realism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/moralrea>.

objectivists there is one source of morality which applies to everyone. Moral actions and beliefs can be wrong or right based on their correspondence with this source. The clearest example can be found in Christian morality, where the will of God determines what is good and bad. If an action or belief corresponds to God's will it is good, if it does not, it is bad. This applies to everyone in the same way. God need not always be the source, of course: objective human rights or Kant's fact of reason³ are other prominent examples.

Harry Frankfurt has a different view on morality. He believes morality does not come from an objective, universal source. Rather, morality is grounded in the individual person, specifically in what they cannot help caring about. The question of how we must act is determined by what we as individuals care about⁴. This means that someone who does not care about the same things as I do is not obligated to do the same things. This is a version of what we call normative subjectivism. Normative subjectivism⁵ implies that someone who cannot help but care about things that we find horrific is not objectively wrong; he or she just has a different viewpoint⁶. When faced with this implication in an interview

for the journal 'Ethical Perspectives', Frankfurt replied the following: "I think, to put it bluntly, that the Nazi may be leading just as fully human a life as anyone else. And our complaint against him is not that he's making some kind of mistake, but that he's getting in our way, and the only reasonable response is not to show him his error but to kill him or suppress him in some way."⁷

I wish to highlight two elements of this response. Firstly, Frankfurt points out that the Nazi is not mistaken. The notion of 'making a mistake' implies that there is a right way to do something, and you are failing to conform to it. When a portrait-artist makes a mistake and her model yells out "my nose does not look like that!"⁸ it is because part of the artist's task was to represent her model's nose, and her painting does not correspond to the source material. Similarly, a normative objectivist could call someone out on a moral mistake by pointing out that an action fails to correspond with the moral source material (like the will of God). For Frankfurt, there is no moral source material. There is nothing outside of us that we can point to, so no mistakes can be made. Secondly, Frankfurt indicates that we

³ Paweł Luków, "The Fact of Reason. Kant's Passage to Ordinary Moral Knowledge," *Kant-Studien* 84, no. 2 (January 1993): 204-219, doi:10.1515/kant.1993.84.2.204.

⁴ Harry G. Frankfurt et al., *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 190.

⁵ Emrys Westacott, "Moral Relativism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/moral-re/#H4>.

⁶ Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *Explaining Value*, 2000, 6, doi:10.1093/0198238045.003.0001.

⁷ Harry G. Frankfurt, "The Importance of Being Earnest (about the Right Things)" Interviewed by de Graef, Ortwin. *Ethical Perspectives* 5, no.1, 1998, 18, http://www.ethical-perspectives.be/page.php?LAN=E&FILE=ep_index&ID=17.

⁸ The literary style of this essay was inspired by Frankfurt's own. Part of this is using random alternations of 'he' and 'she' in examples, instead of relying on the ugly 'he/she', sexist 'he'-only or awkwardly converting everything to plural 'they'.

cannot show someone his errors if he has not made a mistake. We cannot point out the one right way to act and demonstrate how different it is from the Nazis' behavior, because there is not only one right way to act. So, we cannot prove him wrong. If his way of living harms the things we care about then we can try to persuade him to change his mind, but if that does not cut it, we have no other option but to suppress or kill him.

I think Frankfurt's worldview makes people uncomfortable for two reasons. The first one lies in our fear of others. Large conflicts are seldom just conflicts of interest. Behind the conflicting goals lies a difference in perspective, beliefs or ideology. In conflict, we thus fight two fights: one so that we gain specific outcomes and one so that our moral beliefs prevail. Since an ideology is only as strong as the belief in it, it can help to solidify one's belief by grounding it in reality. An example: the words 'under God' were only added to the American pledge of allegiance during the cold war, when atheist communism was threatening Christian American culture⁹. Though liberty and justice – also mentioned in the pledge – are reasons to fight for, they may be subject to change and up for debate. Moreover, liberty and justice are attributes that can be shared by the enemy. In contrast 'having God on your side' cannot be shared, it cannot be changed, and it is indifferent to our disputes about it. Believing to have 'God on your side' or more generally 'Good on your side' is a way of solidifying

your belief by grounding it in something external and thereby sheltering it from the fallible and changing human mind.

The second reason is that we are afraid of ourselves and what we are capable of. Our moral beliefs can completely change over the course of a lifetime. The realization that you could one day behave in a way that you now find completely unacceptable is scary to anyone. Think of a devout Catholic man with a wife and kids who in the future will 'come out' as a homosexual and lose his faith. At the current moment, he is not yet aware of his capacity to be sexually attracted to other men and his faith seems unshakeable to him. Furthermore, he views sodomy and non-believing as terrible sins. If he would realize that he could one day commit such terrible sins without remorse, this future-self would frighten him deeply. Although this fear can be experienced by both the normative objectivist and subjectivist, this discomfort is greater for the subjectivist. The objectivist might say that, since morality is grounded in something external, the conservative Catholic and the atheist homosexual cannot both be right. We might not be able to tell whether homosexuality is ultimately acceptable or not, but only one of these corresponds to objective moral truth, not both. The objectivist might therefore be reassured by the idea that even though he might sway from the right path, the right path remains unmoved. His actions might make him immoral, but the moral fabric of the universe remains

⁹ Christopher Petrella, "The Ugly History of the Pledge of Allegiance - and Why It Matters," The Washington Post, November 03, 2017, , accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/11/03/the-ugly-history-of-the-pledge-of-allegiance-and-why-it-matters>.

completely stable. In contrast, the subjectivist has no such reassurance. In changing his moral convictions, the moral fabric of his entire universe shifts, with no stable external morality to back it up. In short, the fear is that if morality is subjective we alone have the power over the moral universe. With great power comes great responsibility, one we do not wish to bear.

These two discomforts are united by a common theme: they both illustrate the fear that if morality is not grounded in an external source, there are no bounds to morality at all: anyone could at any point do whatever and be morally justified. In the first discomfort this is manifested in the fear that moral beliefs of others that we find appalling might be just as valid as our own. In the second discomfort this is manifested in the fear that the moral beliefs of our future self are just as valid as our current ones. In both cases this discomfort becomes greater when the alternative moral view differs more from our current one. The more unrestrained morality is, the more it could differ from our moral beliefs, the more uncomfortable it gets.

In this essay the argument I will try to make is the following: in normative subjectivism in the style of Frankfurt, moral views are not unrestrained: there are bounds to what we can believe to be moral. In fact, moral views are more restricted in Frankfurt-like normative

subjectivism than they are in normative objectivism. We therefore have no reason to be too uncomfortable.

“...why reality is important: we live in the real world! We depend upon it, we need it, we need to know about it, we need to be able to find our way around it and if we don't have the truth we can't do those things!”

Harry Frankfurt in 'Bullshit'

Vitamins were important to the Greeks (Morality bounded by truth)

While Frankfurt is a complete subjectivist when it comes to morality, he is a complete objectivist when it comes to his view on metaphysics¹⁰: a world exists, it is outside of us and it is independent of our thoughts about it. This is most vividly expressed in the motto “vitamins were important to the Greeks”¹¹: the Greeks might have been ignorant when it comes to the existence of vitamins, they might have therefore not cared the least bit about them, they might have never actively undertaken any action to consume them, but they were important to them: vitamins influence the body's health and longevity, and these are things they did care about¹¹. This example illustrates that for Frankfurt reality is independent of our thoughts and feelings about it. For Frankfurt, empirical disputes (unlike moral disputes)

¹⁰ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth* (New York: Knopf, 2017), 9.

¹¹ Harry G. Frankfurt et al., *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 181.

resemble the previous mentioned example of the portrait artist. When the artist replies: “Your nose does look like that!”, she is referring to a source material: the actual nose of her model. Since reality is singular and indifferent to individual opinions, the artist and/or the model must have made an error, they cannot both be right.

Before we continue, it is important to understand a crucial concept within the philosophy of Frankfurt: *wholeheartedness*. To be wholehearted is to have none of the desires you identify with contradict each other¹². This does not mean that you always act the way you would want to, nor that you never change your mind or doubt yourself. It just means no contradictions arise from the things you identify as wanting. An example: imagine a person who both has the desire to never smoke again and the desire to have one last cigarette. She has not made her mind up and she identifies with both. She sees herself both as a smoker and a quitter. This person is un-wholehearted since smoking and quitting directly contradict each other. Now imagine that this same person (who both has the desire to smoke and quit), sees the desire to smoke as a rogue part of her that she is tormented by. What she truly wants is to go cold turkey, but her desire for another nicotine fix just will not let her. In this case this person is wholehearted. She might still be troubled, she might still not act in the way she would really want to, but

she has made her choice. The only desire she identifies with is the desire to quit smoking forever and this is not in contradiction with anything¹³.

Most of us would agree that it is undesirable to be un-wholehearted. This is a first restriction on morality. When we are faced with a moral dilemma, we can sometimes have contradictory moral intuitions. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is the ‘Fat Man-case’ in the famous trolley dilemmas¹⁴. In this scenario, the only way of saving five people is by pushing one large man in front of a train. Many people do not know what to do here; they want to both push and not push the man, and they realize they cannot do both. When incoherency like this is pointed out, most people feel forced to pick a side. Of course, this is only a small restriction on our morality. (In this regard, morality is only bounded by analytical truths such as transitivity or the law of the excluded middle.¹⁵). Furthermore, this restriction applies for both metaphysical objectivists and subjectivists.

Nevertheless, this restriction in the form of wholeheartedness is greatly extended for metaphysical realists, because they take empirical knowledge into account. When they do this, they extend their scope. They do not just include their desires in isolation from their minds, but take into consideration the way they are restricted by reality. If you have the desire to smoke, but there is no tobacco shop

¹² Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 165.

¹³ Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 165.

¹⁴ Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The Trolley Problem,” *The Yale Law Journal* 94, no. 6 (May 1985): 1409, doi:10.2307/796133.

¹⁵ Transitivity: if $a \rightarrow b$ and $b \rightarrow c$ then $a \rightarrow c$. Law of the excluded middle: a or not a , but never both.

for miles around and you care about not having to drive for hours, your choice is easily made. To extend this to moral issues let us consider the following. You identify with the following aspects of your volitional complex. One, you care about the well-being of other people, and two, you want to donate 10.000 euros to the 'Make a Wish' foundation. In addition, you believe that all human lives have equal worth. At first glance this seems perfectly coherent and – not taking into account any unknown volitional elements – this person seems perfectly wholehearted. Indeed, based on these three elements alone no contradictions can be found.

But say someone were to refer you to an article which compares the expenses of several charities, and this article tells you the 'Make a Wish'-foundations needs an average of 10.000 euros to make one wish of a terminally ill kid come true; this could be a single day pretending to be a princess, meeting a famous singer or be driven around in a racecar. The article also mentions that 'Cure the World' can save five young lives from a life-threatening disease, for the same amount of money. The latter clearly 'buys' more well-being; just think of the parental grief that would get prevented. When faced with this empirical knowledge you probably change your belief about what the moral thing to do is. All of a sudden donating to 'Make a Wish' is contradictory, and no longer a moral thing to do.

When we have aesthetical disputes, like whether the Beatles or the Stones are better, there are no facts we can use to convince our interlocutor. We might use authority or rhetoric to convince someone, but presenting a table about

the notes/minute of each song will not do much good (They could reply: "it might be more complex, but it isn't better!"). Moral discourse with a Frankfurtian is something completely different. Facts matter here. Even though this person might be wholehearted in her moral beliefs, we could show that she is incoherent based on facts. We could show that she is empirically un-wholehearted. Sure, we are able to ignore facts. Sometimes we actively deny facts that are too much of a shock to our worldview, but to a large extent we try to avoid incoherence, and once we truly realize that we cannot have our cake and eat it too, we choose.

If normative subjectivism was paired with metaphysical subjectivism, moral disputes would become very similar to aesthetical disputes. You can indeed find just about anything beautiful without running into contradictions. Facts present no bounds. In this case the discomfort would be justified: if someone believes that reality is dependent on our mind and there is no static 'true' reality behind it, he could come to have any moral belief system as long as it is internally consistent. A dictator with this world view could care for the wellbeing of his starving populace and spend millions on cars and palaces, all the while not making any philosophical errors. In reality, every dollar spent for his own luxury is a dollar not spent on bread for the people. In reality, no symbol of status has a positive effect on the wellbeing so great that it outweighs their need for food. Yet, if he does not care about, or believe in reality, then this is not an issue for him. If there is no source material, one cannot make an error.

But Frankfurt cares about truth. He believes the world we live in restricts us. We do not have infinite resources so sometimes we cannot reasonably do anything except choose. The morals of a Frankfurtian are bounded. If he really does care about truth, he is bound to strive to not only be consistent within, but also with the world he finds himself in.

Stuck in the middle with you (Morality bounded by causality)

To comprehend the second - and greater - way in which Frankfurt's subjectivist morality is constrained we have to understand his conception of free will. Most traditional incompatibilist conceptions of free will share the requirement that an action is only free if the agent could have done otherwise. In 'Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility' Frankfurt calls this the principle of alternate possibilities (PAP)¹⁶. This seems to make intuitive sense: if you could not have possibly done otherwise there was not much of a choice. That seems similar to a situation in which someone forces you to do something and leaves you no option. We would hardly call this action free.

This traditional view of free actions (PAP required) is sometimes mockingly called 'the little gods view' because of the way it contradicts causal determinism. If human beings generally act freely and in most of our choices we could have

done otherwise, we seem separated from the causality of the world surrounding us. Rocks fall according to laws, electricity flows according to laws, atoms move according to laws. But humans who are themselves built from the same law-abiding fabric would somehow be exempted from this ruling. If this is the case, we are causes that are not caused by anything, unmoved movers, little gods.

Frankfurt has a different view on free will. He believes that the PAP is not a necessary requirement¹⁷. Examples that do not satisfy the PAP, but nevertheless (intuitively) display actions of free will, have become known as Frankfurt-type cases. My personal favorite Frankfurt-type case was first described by Fischer¹⁸ and is illustrated below.

Imagine a hypothetical evil plot conspired by the Democrats. They have secretly implanted microchips into voters' brains. These chips will remain completely dormant unless, whilst in the voting booth, a voter is just about to choose a Republican. At that point, the microchip briefly intervenes to change the behavior of the voter in such a way that they select a Democrat instead and leave the booth. Afterwards the microchip will deactivate (until the next election). Now, imagine the chip successfully fulfils its purpose: someone intended to vote Republican but the chip made her vote Democrat instead. This voter was clearly coerced and her action was not free. However, what about the voter that already intended to vote Democrat? She goes

¹⁶ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (1969): 839, doi:10.2307/2023833.

¹⁷ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (1969): 830, doi:10.2307/2023833.

¹⁸ John Martin Fischer, "Recent Work on Moral Responsibility," *Ethics* 110, no. 1 (1999): 109, doi:10.1086/233206.

into the voting booth, selects her candidate of choice and leaves. The chip remains dormant, hence no intervention, and the voter acts exactly how she intended.

A traditional view on free will would claim that the second voter's action was not free, because the principle of alternate possibilities was not met. The voter could not have done otherwise, because, whether she wanted to or not, she would have voted Democrat. But she did want to! The second voter completely identified with her choice to vote Democrat. It was her choice, regardless of the fact that she could not have done otherwise. It therefore does not seem right to say that this action was not free. Frankfurt composes a different conception of free will that perhaps is less intuitive but holds up better against philosophical scrutiny. He proposes that an action is free if one wanted this action to happen and if one identifies with it¹⁹.

Unlike the little gods view, Frankfurt's view is compatible with determinism. This means that under his definition of free choice, the universe could be completely causally determined, all our actions could be set in stone from the start, but we could still be free. Here we reach another restraint on morality in normative subjectivism: the inability to escape from the causal chain. When Frankfurt uses the phrase 'cannot help but care about'²⁰ he means it. If we are not little gods, we do not always have an alternate possibility, i.e., there are some things we are just stuck with.

As human beings, we are definitely free in so far that we come to identify with beliefs and desires. But are we able to go against them? Say you are having a cup of tea at your much beloved and blind grandmother's house. You notice that she has left her safe open and all her valuable jewelry lies there for the taking. You care for your grandmother, you do not think it is moral to steal and you do not want the jewelry (you have no reason to do so: you are more than satisfied with the money you earn, you do not wear jewelry yourself and you know no one who would appreciate it as a gift etc.). Would you be able to steal the jewelry? You might say 'if I needed the money I might' or 'if I did not love my grandmother I might' or even 'If I needed to prove a philosophical point I might'. But, assuming circumstances did not change, would you be able to do it? Remember that you have no motive to steal, you do not want the jewelry, you do not want to harm your grandmother and you do not want to be a thief. If you were a little god, you would be able to steal the jewelry in principle, but I would say that we human beings simply cannot.

Our upbringing and culture shape us so that we identify with certain desires and beliefs. We come to care for other people and we come to care about certain principles. If there is nothing to make us act contrary to those beliefs and desires, we do not and in fact we are not able to. In unchanging circumstances, we thus do not have to be afraid

¹⁹ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (1969): 838, doi:10.2307/2023833.

²⁰ Harry G. Frankfurt et al., *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 190.

that we betray what we care for, because we cannot. We are not the masters of our own moral universe (though we might be responsible for it.²¹).

If normative subjectivism was paired with a traditional conception of free will, this too would lead to unrestrained morality. The experienced discomfort would then be justified. If we would indeed all be 'little gods', unmoved movers in our own right, we could at any point choose to do anything. This means that the moral balance of the world is only dependent on trillions of moral decisions falling the right way, though they could have fallen the other way every time. We would be wholly dependent on the (unnecessary) benevolence of people, time and time again for every choice. When we look at it from an individual level this would mean that we could indeed at any point do something horrible, even without a gradual change of character or changing circumstances. It seems much more plausible, however, that in unchanging circumstances we truly are not able to betray what we care for. The fact that we want many of our decisions to be the way that they are does not mean we could have done otherwise. If it is unrestrained morality that discomforts you when faced with Frankfurt, you should fear not. Ask yourself this: if you had to choose, would you trust a 'little god' acting in accordance with his belief of an unperceivable moral source, or a determined being acting in accordance with what he cannot help but care about. Which one seems more restrained?

Cold comfort (Comfort of normative objectivism)

As I hope to have illustrated, normative subjectivism implies unrestrained morality only when combined with metaphysical subjectivism or a traditional conception of free will, neither of which are essential to normative subjectivism. The discomfort people experience in normative subjectivism is thus not justified. But, what about the comfort they find in normative objectivism?

When a normative objectivist is faced with a Nazi, how does having 'Good on her side' help her? Will this make her able to show him the error in his ways? We can empirically conclude that this is not the case. Jehovah's witnesses are convinced to have God on their side, but many of the doors they knock on get slammed shut. Perhaps their problem is that they believe in a wrong moral truth, and someone whose beliefs are in correspondence with the real objective moral truth would be able to convince all their interlocutors. Many times in history, however, we have seen opposing parties, both believing to have Good or God on their side, clashing without reaching a consensus in an argument. Muslims versus Christians; Confederates versus the Unionists; native tribes versus colonialists; Persians versus Greeks... The list goes on. Never did one single moral view prevail over all. In the end, the Allies – many of whom where normative objectivists – had to suppress and kill Nazis just as much as Frankfurt would have.

²¹ The focus of 'Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility' lies on moral responsibility and not on free will although these concepts are heavily intertwined. This essay highlights the role of freedom of choice but I wanted to acknowledge the more intended meaning of the work with this final sentence.

When people with a different moral viewpoint stand in our way, there is much we can do. We can accept them if they do us little harm; we can play on their imagination; inspire them; show them the nastiness of their views and the beauty of our own. But if all else fails, and they are thoroughly in our way, we can do nothing more than suppress or kill. The existence of an objective moral truth does not change this arsenal, it does not change the odds, and it does not change what we have to do.

Nothing to fear but fear itself (Conclusion)

We can conclude that normative subjectivism implies unrestrained morality only when combined with metaphysical subjectivism or a traditional conception of free will. Since Frankfurt's philosophy has none of these characteristics, we have no reason to fear that in his philosophical view anyone could find anything moral. The discomfort people experience in his normative subjectivism is thus not justified. Meanwhile the comfort we experience in normative objectivism seems idle: it is merely a comforting idea that does not have real world consequences. There are many reasons to agree or disagree with the philosophy of Frankfurt, but fear should not be one of them.

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Koen Schoenmakers (1997) is a fulltime student in both philosophy and public administration at EUR. He believes that philosophy is only valuable if it has societal impact. Consequently, one of the questions that interests him most is "In what way do philosophy and knowledge influence politics and society?". In the future he hopes to communicate philosophical and scientific knowledge in popular media.

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