The Path of Life

John Martin Fischer
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE

Presidential address delivered at the eighty-seventh annual Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in San Francisco, California, on March 29, 2013.

I. INTRODUCTION

I have argued on behalf of an "actual-sequence" model of moral responsibility. On an actual-sequence approach, moral responsibility does not require the kind of control that involves "freedom to do otherwise" or, in a more regimented manner of expression, genuine access to alternative possibilities. If an actual-sequence model of moral responsibility could be defended successfully, this would bring tremendous philosophical benefits. In particular, we would be able to side-step the traditionally contentious and apparently intractable debates about whether human beings can be free to do otherwise, if there are propositions that were true in the past that specify how we will behave in the future, if God (understood in a certain way) believed in the past that we would behave as we do, or if causal determinism obtains. These debates lead to what I have dubbed "Dialectical Stalemates"—black holes in philosophical space-time in which progress is hard to come by. If we do not need freedom to do otherwise in order to be morally responsible, it is possible that we can indeed make philosophical progress on moral responsibility. Switching from the traditional "alternative-possibilities" model to an actual-sequence model is nothing less than a paradigm shift. There is a lot at stake, then, in evaluating the contention that we ought to adopt an actual-sequence approach to moral responsibility.

There are various different ways of elaborating and defending an actual-sequence approach to moral responsibility. As far as I am concerned, I welcome these alternative approaches; this is one context (the context of defending an actual-sequence approach) in which, perhaps ironically, I embrace alternative possibilities! Alternative strategies for defending the actual-sequence approach to moral responsibility include what might be called "Strawson-style" and "Dennett-style" argumentation. I have explored a "Frankfurt-style" approach to the defense of the actual-sequence model of moral responsibility. I wish here to elaborate the defense a bit further in light of some objections, and I shall highlight the way in which an actual-
sequence approach to moral responsibility can help to address challenges to our responsibility stemming from both causal determinism and causal indeterminism.

II. THE FRANKFURT-STYLE CASES

Philosophers have worried that if causal determinism were true, we would not ever have freedom to do otherwise, and thus we would not be morally responsible for our behavior. My way of seeking to address this concern relies on the so-called "Frankfurt-style" counterexamples to the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP). These much-discussed examples were originally introduced in contemporary philosophy by Harry Frankfurt in order to impugn PAP, according to which moral responsibility requires the kind of control that involves freedom to choose and do otherwise.1 Here is an updated version of a Frankfurt example:

Black is a stalwart defender of the democratic party. He has secretly inserted a chip in Jones's brain which enables Black to monitor and control Jones's activities. Black can exercise this control through a sophisticated computer that he has programmed so that, among other things, it monitors Jones's voting behavior. If Jones were to show any inclination to vote for a republican (or, let us say, anyone other than the democrat), then the computer, through the chip in Jones's brain, would intervene to assure that he actually decides to vote for the democrat and does so vote. But if Jones decides on his own to vote for the democrat (as Black, one of the only progressive neurosurgeons in the known world, would prefer), the computer does nothing but continue to monitor—without affecting—the goings-on in Jones's head.

Now suppose that Jones decides to vote for the democrat on his own, just as he would have if Black had not inserted the chip in his head.2

It seems, upon first thinking about this case, that Jones can be held morally responsible for this choice and act of voting for the democrat, although he could not have chosen otherwise and he could not have done otherwise. It is plausible to me that Black's presence (as described in the example), perhaps together with other features, makes it the case that Jones cannot choose or do other than he actually does. Further, it seems to me that Black's presence (in the context of those other features) is irrelevant to Jones's moral responsibility. It might be helpful to have...
before us Frankfurt's statements on behalf of the contention that Black's presence is irrelevant to Jones's moral responsibility:

The fact that a person could not have avoided doing something is a sufficient condition of his having done it. But, as some of my examples show, this fact may play no role whatever in the explanation of why he did it. It may not figure at all among the circumstances that actually brought it about that he did what he did, so that his action is to be accounted for on another basis entirely. . . . Now if someone had no alternative to performing a certain action but did not perform it because he was unable to do otherwise, then he would have performed exactly the same action even if he could have done otherwise. The circumstances that made it impossible for him to do otherwise could have been subtracted from the situation without affecting what happened or why it happened in any way. Whatever it was that actually led the person to do what he did, or that made him do it, would have led him to do it or made him do it even if it had been possible for him to do something else instead. . . . When a fact is in this way irrelevant to the problem of accounting for a person's action it seems quite gratuitous to assign it any weight in the assessment of his moral responsibility.3

I agree with Frankfurt's intuition that it would be "quite gratuitous" to assign any weight to Black's presence in assessing Jones's moral responsibility. After all, Black's device, although present, is untriggered. I think that the Frankfurt-style examples help to provide motivation for an "actual-sequence" approach to moral responsibility, according to which moral responsibility attributions depend on (possibly dispositional or modal) features of the actual sequence, rather than on the availability of genuinely open alternative possibilities. The mere presence of certain sorts of untriggered ensurers (such as Black's device) rules out alternative possibilities without in any way affecting the relevant features of the actual sequence.

I like to call Frankfurt's intuition here "Frankfurt's Quite Gratuitous Point." But I concede that the name suffers from a kind of infelicitous, if delicious, ambiguity. I shall follow David Palmer in crystallizing a principle—The Irrelevance Principle (IP)—that arguably captures Frankfurt's point here:
(IP) If a fact is irrelevant to a correct account of the causal explanation of the person's action, then this fact is irrelevant to the issue of the person's moral responsibility.⁴

Arguably, in the Frankfurt-style cases, the fact that the agent could not have done otherwise is irrelevant to a correct account of the causal explanation of her actions. According to IP, then, the fact that the agent could not have done otherwise is irrelevant to the agent's moral responsibility. It would follow that, if causal determinism threatens moral responsibility, it is not in virtue of ruling out freedom to do otherwise. This all seems right to me, but we need to consider the Irrelevance Principle a bit more carefully.

III. THE IRRELEVANCE PRINCIPLE

It seems to me that the Irrelevance Principle, suitably interpreted, is true. But various philosophers have found fault with it (or a closely related principle seeking to capture the basic idea). David Palmer has presented a variant of an example due to David Widkerker, which Palmer deems a "clear counterexample" to the Irrelevance Principle:

Suppose that Jones decides to break a promise for some personal gain despite knowing that it is morally wrong for him to do this. He does not decide to break his promise for the reason that it is morally wrong. He makes the decision in spite of knowing this, deciding to break his promise simply for self-interested motives. In other words, since Jones decides to break his promise for personal gain, it is true of him that he would have made the same decision whether or not he believed his decision to be immoral.⁵

Palmer goes on to analyze the example as follows:

The fact that Jones knows that his decision to break his promise is morally wrong is irrelevant to a correct account of the causal explanation of what he did and so, according to (IP), it would be irrelevant to the issue of his moral responsibility. But surely the fact that Jones knows it would be morally wrong to break the promise and yet does so anyway does bear on his moral responsibility. A person is more blameworthy, it would seem, if he knows his action is morally wrong and acts anyway in spite of knowing this, than if he does not know it to be morally wrong.⁶
Here is a pair of examples that also seems to impugn IP, "No-Sharks" and "Sharks":

No-Sharks: John is walking along a beach, and he sees a child struggling in the water. John believes that he could save the child with very little effort (which we suppose is true in the example), but he is disinclined to expend any energy to help anyone else. He decides not to try to save the child, and he continues to walk along the beach. Unfortunately, the child drowns.

Sharks: John is walking along a beach, and he sees a child struggling in the water. John believes that he could save the child with very little effort, but he is disinclined to expend any energy to help anyone else. He decides not to try to save the child, and he continues to walk along the beach. Unbeknownst to John, if he had jumped in, a patrol of sharks that infested the water between the beach and the struggling child would have eaten him.7

It seems that John is morally responsible for failing to save the child in No-Sharks, but not in Sharks, and yet the presence and dispositions of the sharks—the only differentiating factor—plays no role in the explanation of John’s behavior in the actual sequence (behavior that arguably constitutes his failure to save the child). It is admittedly somewhat difficult to specify what exactly explains a failure or omission; in any case, it is at least plausible that the presence of the sharks does not explain John’s failing to save the child. The sharks certainly are not a causal link in the actual sequence leading to John’s behavior—behavior that constituted, in the circumstances, his failing to save the child.8

Admittedly, cases involving omissions present delicate issues; here is a pair of cases (due to Carolina Sartorio) involving moral responsibility for consequences:

SWITCH: A train is running out of control down a track. The train approaches a switch. Flipping the switch would send the train down a side track for a while, but the tracks reconverge up ahead, before the location of a victim who has been tied to the track. An agent, who is standing by the switch, has reason to believe that a large fragment of track is missing from the main line between the switch and the victim’s location. So he has reason to believe that, unless he flips the switch, the train will continue on
the main track and derail, and thus the victim will survive. Given that he wants the victim to die, he flips the switch. As a result, the train travels on the side track, then back on the main track again after the tracks come back together, and ends up killing the victim.

Distinguish two scenarios of this kind:

SWITCH 1 A fragment of the main track between the switch and the victim's location was indeed missing.

SWITCH 2 The main track was intact (unbeknownst to the agent, someone had reconnected it earlier).9

Sartorio goes on to analyze these cases as follows:

The victim dies in both cases. Now, it seems that whereas the agent is responsible for the victim's death in SWITCH 1, he is not responsible for the death in SWITCH 2. In SWITCH 2, the fact that the victim would have died even if he had failed to flip the switch seems to relieve the agent of responsibility for the death (he is still responsible for acting with a bad intention, but not for the victim's death). . . . This suggests that, when an agent is responsible for an outcome, factors that are not links in the causal sequence issuing in the outcome can ground the agent's responsibility for the outcome.10

Despite these (and other) proposed counterexamples to IP, I continue to believe that the Irrelevance Principle captures a very important—indeed, a crucial—insight. Further, I am inclined to believe that the counterexamples all exploit a vagueness in IP, and that once this vagueness is removed in favor of a certain, more specific, interpretation, IP will emerge unscathed. Recall the formulation above:

(IP) If a fact is irrelevant to a correct account of the causal explanation of the person's action, then this fact is irrelevant to the issue of the person's moral responsibility.

The problematic vagueness is in the phrase, "the issue of the person's moral responsibility," because there are various different issues pertaining to a person's moral responsibility. I would distinguish at least three such issues (or kinds of issue.) There is the issue of the degree of one's moral responsibility (or perhaps the degree of one's praiseworthiness
or blameworthiness). There is also the issue of the content of one's moral responsibility, that is, the specific items for which one is morally responsible. Here we might include moral responsibility for actions, omissions, consequences (construed as particulars or universals), emotional reactions, traits of character, and so forth. And obviously we may have variation even within each category. So, for example, if someone is morally responsible for an action, it still remains to specify for exactly *which* action; similarly, if an agent is morally responsible for a consequence, it remains to specify for exactly *which* consequence, and so forth. Finally, there is the question of whether an agent (in a given context) is morally responsible to *any degree for at least something* (in the context). We might call this issue the question of whether the agent is "morally responsible at all" in the context.

Note that the case of Jones deciding to break a promise pertains to the first question—the question of degree. But, as far as I can tell, it does not imply anything problematic about the question of moral responsibility at all; Jones is clearly morally responsible to some degree for something, and even more so, given his knowledge of the moral wrongness of his behavior. Similarly, both the pair of cases involving omissions (No-Sharks and Sharks) and the pair of cases involving consequences (Switch1 and Switch2) pertain to the second question—the question of content (or what specifically the agent is responsible for). But this is a different issue from the issue of whether the agent is morally responsible at least to *some* degree for *something* in the cases; the examples do not imply anything problematic about the question of "moral responsibility at all," and thus they are not counterexamples to the Irrelevance Principle, appropriately understood.

I would suggest that the proper interpretation of IP is:

(IP*) If a fact (external to the agent) is irrelevant to a correct account of the causal explanation of the person's action in a given context, then this fact is irrelevant to the issue of the person's "moral responsibility at all," *i.e.*, to the issue of whether the agent is morally responsible to *at least some degree for at least something in the context in question.*

On this interpretation of IP, none of the purported counterexamples is successful. I believe this interpretation captures the very powerful idea Frankfurt put his finger on. And it is interesting to see that not only does the Irrelevance Principle help to support the compatibility of causal determinism and moral responsibility, but for an importantly similar
reason it supports the compatibility of causal indeterminism and moral responsibility. I now turn to this point.

IV. RANDOMIZING THE FRANKFURT-STYLE CASES

In the Frankfurt-style case discussed above, Black is a “counterfactual intervener.” More specifically, he is an “untriggered ensurer” of the relevant result—that Jones votes for the democrat. Now imagine that, although Black is still progressive, he has a wild streak (or perhaps a mischievous desire not to be too predictable). He thus decides to flip a fair coin (which, we assume here, is both causally indeterministic and a genuinely random process—whatever that requires) just prior to Jones’s decision in the voting booth. Black stipulates that if the coin comes up heads, he will simply allow Jones to vote for the democrat (given that Black sees that Jones is about to vote for the democrat). He further stipulates that if the coin comes up tails, he will trigger an intervention in Jones’s brain sufficient to cause Jones to vote for the republican instead (despite Black’s seeing that Jones is about to vote for the democrat). Let us suppose that things actually develop along the causal sequence leading to Jones’s decision to vote for the democrat and his voting for the democrat exactly the way they do in the original case; that is, Jones votes for the democrat on his own. So we are here supposing that the coin comes up heads just prior to Jones’s decision and thus that Black does not trigger a pre-emptive intervention on behalf of those pesky republicans.

Note that in the randomized Frankfurt-style case the relationship between Jones’s prior mental states and his choice to vote for the democrat is indeterministic; the prior states of Jones’s mind (together with background conditions and the laws of nature) do not entail Jones’s choice. Some skeptics about the possibility of control of the kind that underwrites moral responsibility in indeterministic contexts have pushed the view that when the prior mental states of the agent (together with background conditions and the laws of nature) do not entail the agent’s choice, then his choice is not really up to the agent in the requisite way (the way required for moral responsibility). They have taken it that when the entailment fails, the choice is arbitrary or a matter of luck; the choice is not linked with or “glued to” the agent’s prior mental states in a way necessary for moral responsibility. According to those who worry about the “luck problem,” insofar as the entailment fails and the “glue” is absent, the choice cannot be said to be attributable to the agent in the way required for moral responsibility.

Some such skeptics invoke the “Rollback Argument,” according to which we could (in our imaginations) roll back the universe to (say) the beginning
of an agent’s deliberations and let it go forward. In some such “replays” the agent will indeed choose as he actually chooses, but in some replays he will not. Given this fact, it can seem as if the agent’s actual choice is not really up to him in the sense required for moral responsibility. After all, everything internal to his mind—all his relevant mental states—is held fixed, and yet in some replays he decides and acts differently from the way in which he actually decides and acts.

Others simply invoke the fact of Bare Transworld Differences to explain their conclusion that it is not really up to Jones how he decides (and acts). Given the lack of entailment between the agent’s prior mental states (together with background conditions and laws of nature) and his choice, there will be possible worlds in which everything about the agent’s prior mental states is held fixed (along with the background conditions and laws of nature) and the agent decides and acts differently from how he actually decides and acts. Again, given this fact, it can seem as if the agent’s actual choice is not really up to him in the sense required for moral responsibility. That is, it seems that it is not really the agent who makes the difference with respect to his decision.

But note that the randomized Frankfurt-style case gives us an elegant way of responding to the skeptics who worry (in various ways) about the luck problem. So let’s think again about the randomized Frankfurt-style case. We can in our imaginations roll the universe back to the time of the beginning of Jones’s deliberation in the voting booth and let it go forward to the time of Jones’s choice and then his action. If we were to do this multiple times (again, in our imaginations), we would note that on some replays Jones does in fact vote for the democrat, and on others he does not. (This follows from—among other things—the fact that Black flips a fair coin just prior to Jones’s decision, and that if the coin were to come up tails, Black would trigger an intervention sufficient to cause Jones to vote for the republican.) And yet everything internal to Jones’s mind—all his beliefs, preferences, acceptances of moral principles, and personality traits—is held fixed in the multiple replays.

It is important to see that the actual sequence involving Jones’s deliberations and leading to his decision to vote for the democrat is exactly the same in the original Frankfurt-style case and the randomized Frankfurt-style case. Thus, if we were inclined to think that the glue that has to hold an agent’s prior mental states together with his decision is present in the original Frankfurt-style case, we should think that it is also present in the randomized Frankfurt-style case. As I have argued previously, we could even think of the actual sequence in the original Frankfurt-style case as causally deterministic. Given this assumption, we could say that it should
be uncontroversial that the glue is present in the original Frankfurt-style case. Note that I am not here supposing that it is uncontentious that Jones would be morally responsible for his act of voting for the democrat under the assumption of causal determinism; surely, it would be highly controversial, and Jones’s moral responsibility here could not simply be asserted. Rather, my contention is merely that it is uncontroversial that the glue that purportedly holds together the relevant prior mental states and the agent’s choice, when the agent is morally responsible, is present, on the assumption of causal determinism.

Given that the glue would be present in a causally deterministic version of the original Frankfurt-style case, and assuming that the intrinsic features of the actual causal sequences leading to the choice are the same in the original and randomized Frankfurt-style cases, it follows that the glue is present in the randomized Frankfurt-style cases. The assumption here is that the glue supervenes on intrinsic features of the causal sequences. And yet in the latter case (the randomized Frankfurt-style case) the relationship between Jones’s prior mental states and his choice is characterized by causal indeterminism. So the mere fact of the applicability of the rollback argument does not rule out the presence of the sort of control required for moral responsibility. This at least suggests that the mere fact of causal indeterminism in the relationship between an agent’s prior mental states and his decision does not rule out the control required for moral responsibility.

Exactly the same sort of analysis can help to address the problem of bare transworld differences. Note that, given that Black flips a fair coin in the circumstances, there are possible worlds in which everything about Jones’s prior mental states is the same as in the original case and yet he decides to vote for the republican (and does so vote). These represent "bare transworld differences." And yet, as above, the glue that holds us together as morally responsible agents—the linkage between our prior mental states and our decisions that is at least necessary, if not sufficient, for moral responsibility—is present in the randomized Frankfurt-style case (insofar as it is assumed to be present in the original Frankfurt-style case). And thus the mere fact of bare transworld differences does not rule out the presence of the sort of control required for moral responsibility. Again, this suggests (in the absence of further worries) that the mere fact of causal indeterminism in the relationship between an agent’s prior mental states and his decision does not rule out the control required for moral responsibility.

Whereas in the original Frankfurt case Black is an untriggered ensurer, in the randomized Frankfurt case Black is an untriggered pre-empter. In both
cases Black is equally a counterfactual intervener—his interventions are untriggered—and, as such, Black's presence is irrelevant to Jones's "moral responsibility at all." It is interesting and important to observe that we can address both the central problems for moral responsibility—the problems posed by causal determinism and indeterminism—in a similar way: by invoking cases involving counterfactual intervention. The intuitive engine driving both arguments is the same: the irrelevance of counterfactual intervention (as captured by the Irrelevance Principle).13

V. THE PARADIGM OF THE PILGRIMAGE

In literature as well as philosophy our lives are often depicted as "journeys." Perhaps Homer's The Odyssey was the first great book in this tradition, which has continued through James Joyce's Ulysses to the present day. One moral of these stories is that we should appreciate and value the journey itself; the journey itself has intrinsic value apart from achieving any goal or arriving at certain destinations. But my point is a bit different. I claim that we can understand our lives as paths that contain no alternative possibilities—no paths that branch off the main path. More specifically, we can so understand our lives consistently with their having great value and meaningfulness—as much value and meaningfulness as we already suppose them to have. And we can so interpret our lives consistently with thinking of ourselves as fully morally responsible agents.

In my view, the switch from an alternative-possibilities model of moral responsibility to an actual-sequence model is nothing short of a paradigm shift. And I suggest that an appropriate metaphor or picture that underlies the actual-sequence approach is the pilgrimage. In a pilgrimage we may suppose that the path is entirely determined or laid out in advance, and yet the pilgrims can nevertheless achieve great and profound spiritual benefits from the journey. The idea is that the possibilities for spiritual growth and transformation do not stem from making choices among different paths or ways of getting to the destination; rather, the meaningfulness of the journey has its roots in something more basic or "direct." Even though the pilgrim's journey is entirely laid out in advance, he can still gain great value from walking this pre-determined path in a certain way—perhaps with mindfulness or an openness to the possibilities of meaning and growth.

I should perhaps point out that I do not suppose that the meaningfulness of a pilgrimage must be understood solely (or even at all) in religious terms. Although one may of course interpret a pilgrimage as essentially a religious experience, one need not. I am inclined to think of a pilgrimage as offering possibilities for spiritual growth and transformation that are not essentially religious. Pilgrims along the famous route from Le Puy in
south-central France to the great cathedral at Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain, or along the Pacific Coast Trail or the Appalachian Trail, for that matter, may be seeking to get away from the rat race, to reflect on their lives from a more detached viewpoint, to come to grips with a significant loss or change in their lives, or, as we used to say, to “find themselves.” In my youth I hiked parts of the John Muir Trail in California, and as a graduate student at Cornell University I hiked parts of the Finger Lakes Trail in upstate New York. I can’t say that I ever really found myself, although at Cornell I did find that I am a Semicompatibilist!

In her book *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago*, Nancy Louise Frey writes:

> For someone who is disenchanted by the Church, the Camino provides a space to create alternatives. A twenty-six-year-old pharmacy student from Madrid explained his decision to walk the Camino thus: “I had left my girlfriend, I had doubts, and I needed answers. I like to walk, and I love the north of Spain.” Guy, a French psychologist in his early forties who walked to Santiago to and from Le Puy, said, “It’s this real dissatisfaction [with life] which gives birth to the desire to start on the Camino.”

At the very end of *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control*, I wrote:

> The future may—or may not—contain more than one genuinely open path: I do not know. It is quite natural to think of the future as open, but it may turn out that the various paths I picture in my mind are mere tantalizing chimeras. Employing a slightly different metaphor, there is just one line extending from the present into the past, and the future may indeed be symmetric—there may be just one line extending into the future. But even so—even if there is just one available path into the future—I may be held accountable for how I walk down this path.

About this passage, Gary Watson wondered whether my invocation of a way of taking the path implicitly presupposes that there is more than one such way available to the agent, in which case we still do not have an “actual-sequence” approach to moral responsibility. But I do not think that moving from talking about moral responsibility for action or behavior to talking about moral responsibility for a way of acting or behaving requires a corresponding move to alternative possibilities as necessary for
moral responsibility. Perhaps I should have put the point as follows: even if there is just one available path into the future and just one available way of walking down it, I may be held accountable for walking down it in that way.\footnote{17}

Consider the pilgrimage from Le Puy to the great cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. This pilgrimage was described in the medieval Pilgrim's Guide.\footnote{18} The pilgrimage is "pre-set" or laid out in advance, and yet this doesn't diminish the potential for spiritual growth, transformation, and meaningfulness for the pilgrims. If there are alternative paths along the way, or possible "short-cuts," I do not see how their availability in any way matters for the meaningfulness of the pilgrims taking this journey; they just seem to be irrelevant. Indeed, I understand that various "refugios" use enticements and even "tricks" to induce pilgrims to stay at their establishments, rather than others. Similarly, whether a pilgrim has a choice of when exactly to start each morning or even what to focus on as she travels the route does not seem to be relevant to the fact that taking the journey can be deeply and profoundly meaningful; again, these alternative possibilities, although undeniably present, do not seem relevant to the issue of meaningfulness. I do not even think that the possibilities for spiritual growth, transformation, and meaningfulness in a pilgrimage hinge on whether the pilgrim had alternative possibilities in choosing to take the journey in the first place.

Of course, it can matter how one takes the pilgrimage. In Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago, Frey writes:

Walkers and cyclists see a world of difference between pilgrims who travel under their own power and those who use some other form of transport to get to Santiago. . . . Most pilgrims of the former category usually consider those who go by bus to be tourists, that is, inauthentic. The latter, they argue, do not understand what it means to be connected to the road and, as [one] put it, to go the "human speed."\footnote{19}

Clearly, certain ways of taking the path—the pilgrimage—matter greatly. I do not wish to deny this—indeed, this was precisely my point in emphasizing the importance of the way we walk down the path of life. My contention, however, is that the importance of the way we walk down the path of life does not stem from our having alternative possibilities—it is, as it were, based on something more direct. So, for example, the meaningfulness of taking the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella by foot does not stem from our having the possibility to take the pilgrimage by bus; again, it is
based on something more direct, and not on our possession of alternative possibilities.

Think, also, of the great Muslim pilgrimage or "hajj" that culminates in the holy city of Makkah in Saudi Arabia. Recently, the Chinese have built a railway that can transport pilgrims in the last phase of the journey. So the pilgrims have a choice about how to take part of the pilgrimage, but does this really matter to the meaningfulness of the journey? Surely the meaningfulness of the experience for the pilgrim does not even in part depend on having a choice between alternative routes at the end.

There is a famous rock-climbing ascent to the top of El Capitain in Yosemite. There is only one route up to the very top. The topological map of the route spells out exactly what a climber is supposed to do at each stage (e.g., climb X feet, stop, climb Y feet, stop, move left into a different crack, stop, etc.) People who accomplish this climb—perhaps the most famous in the world—are justly proud of their accomplishment, although the final ascent is entirely pre-set and without alternative possibilities. Again, one has a choice about what one focuses one's mind on, when exactly to start the final ascent, what shoes to wear, but prudent or appropriate decisions about these matters, or even the possession of the associated alternative possibilities, do not seem to be the basis of the meaningfulness of the successful ascent.

Of course, the dialectical situation, abstractly considered, is similar to the situation with respect to the Frankfurt cases. Notoriously, it is very difficult to construct a Frankfurt-style case in which it is both true that the relevant agent is intuitively deemed morally responsible for his behavior and he also has no alternative possibilities. Mercifully, one does not have to sort through the voluminous literature on Frankfurt-style cases to see the point: even if there are residual alternative possibilities in the most well-constructed Frankfurt-style cases, these alternative possibilities appear to be irrelevant to the agent's moral responsibility. Like the possibility of a pilgrim to begin her journey at 7:05 a.m. rather than 7:00 a.m., these residual alternative possibilities are what I have called "mere flickers of freedom." They are insufficiently robust to make a difference to the agent's moral responsibility. To emphasize: I am of course not supposing that questions about meaningfulness in life—or a pilgrimage—are the same as questions about moral responsibility. Rather, I am suggesting that there is a dialectical isomorphism that is helpful to note: just as the residual and ineliminable alternative possibilities do not seem to add to, or constitute, the explanation for the meaningfulness of a pilgrimage, so with the alternative possibilities that remain in the Frankfurt-style cases.
They are mere flickers of freedom and thus insufficiently robust to ground attributions of moral responsibility.

Mere flickers of freedom are shadowy—even ghostly—things. If (and that is a big “if”) you are inclined to hold that moral responsibility requires genuine access to alternative possibilities, these are not the sort of alternative possibilities you have (or ought to have) in mind. So next time you read an article with the “nth” iteration of a Frankfurt-style case in which the author alleges that he has shown that there are indeed residual alternative possibilities, ask yourself: Does it really matter? Are these the sorts of alternative possibilities that can plausibly ground moral responsibility, on the picture according to which we do indeed require alternative possibilities for moral responsibility? Or are they mere flickers of freedom?

Thus, the Frankfurt-style cases, much reviled by some, point to something deep and important: moral responsibility depends on the features (perhaps modal or dispositional) of the actual path—the actual sequence—and not on the availability of alternative paths. The cases strongly suggest, but admittedly do not (even with ancillary argumentation) entail this result. But it is unreasonable to suppose that any philosophical thought-experiment will uncontroversially entail a substantial and contentious result in a great philosophical debate. Again: the next time you read an article in which the author triumphantly declares that he has found a reason to think that the Frankfurt-style cases, no matter how much you fancy them up, fall slightly short of entailing the intended conclusion, ask yourself: Why should anyone be surprised by this at all? Isn’t the point of the cases to latch onto and resonate with some basic intuitive judgments, thus strongly suggesting a new way of conceptualizing moral responsibility—a new paradigm? Is it ever the case in philosophy that a new paradigm is actually entailed by the evidence pointing toward it?20

VI. CONCLUSION

It is interesting to see that certain central threats to our moral responsibility—from causal determinism and indeterminism—can be addressed in what are, at a deep level, parallel ways. Here I have sought to highlight this deep parallelism. Driving the isomorphic replies to central challenges to our moral responsibility is the fundamental insight that mere untriggered interventions—or counterfactual interventions—are irrelevant to our moral responsibility.

Over the years (and I hope I still have many to go—but that is the subject of a certain grant you might have heard about) I have attempted to fill
in the actual-sequence model of moral responsibility. (By the way, immortality might be choiceworthy insofar as it will probably take that long to convince people of the true doctrine of free will and moral responsibility: Semicompatibilism!) Even though it does not matter for moral responsibility whether we have freedom to do otherwise, it does matter whether we act freely or exhibit a distinctive kind of control, which I have called "guidance control." I have given an account of guidance control on which such control is compatible with both causal determinism and causal indeterminism. Guidance control, I have argued, is all the freedom required for moral responsibility.

The value of exhibiting this distinctive kind of control is not the value of making a difference (as can be seen in the Frankfurt-style cases). Rather, the value is the value of making a statement—of expressing oneself in a certain way. More specifically, when one exhibits guidance control, one writes a part of the narrative of one’s life. It is our freedom—our capacity for guidance control—that renders us authors of the narratives of our lives. It is this freedom that transforms our lives into the subject matter for genuine narratives and that makes it the case that our lives have an irreducibly narrative dimension of evaluation.

Our freedom of the will then allows for a distinctive kind of creative self-expression. But this is not a radical kind of creation ex nihilo, as with God creating the universe from nothing. Rather, we exhibit guidance control (and thus the specific kind of creativity that grounds our status as morally responsible agents) insofar as we are linked in suitable ways with the natural and normative environment, that is, by acting from our own, reasons-responsive mechanisms. Our freedom of the will does not give us a “godlike” capacity to transcend our environment, but neither are we insensitive to its normative richness. Our freedom of the will—understood as guidance control—then puts us somewhere between God (as traditionally construed) and mere animals. This is not as much freedom as some philosophers have wanted, but, in my view, it is enough to make our journeys meaningful. It is enough freedom to propel us along the path of life, where we can hope to walk with dignity, with compassion, and perhaps even a sense of humor.

At my very first American Philosophical Association Convention—and it was an Eastern Division Meeting, I must confess—I expressed to Harry Frankfurt my excitement at having met so many philosophers whose work I had previously read and about whose work I had written in my dissertation. I was fortunate enough to have had a healthy number of job interviews, and Frankfurt said, “This will be the only time in your career that you will have the attention of so many big-shots." Frankfurt was probably right, at
least up until this very moment. In any case, I wish to take advantage of this opportunity to end with a brief passage from The Ramayana:

There are three things that are real: God, human frailty, and laughter. The first two are beyond human comprehension, so we must do what we can with the third.

NOTES
4. David Palmer, "Deterministic Frankfurt Cases," unpublished manuscript, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Department of Philosophy.
8. Here it might be helpful to distinguish the explanation of John’s actual failure to save the child from the explanation of the obtaining of the fact that no matter what John tried, he would have failed to save the child. This is, as it were, a “modalized omission,” or perhaps a modalized fact involving an omission. For discussion of modalized facts in the context of moral responsibility for omissions, see Fischer and Ravizza, Responsibility and Control, 102–103.
10. Ibid., 181–82.

This affirmation, incompatibilists might complain, is a rhetorical flourish to which Fischer is not strictly entitled. Here the path metaphor seems a bit misused. In the abstract sense required by the argument, a "way" is of course a path, a metapath, perhaps, of which there is only one if determinism is true. The aspiration to define one's own way . . . might be called an ideal of autonomy. Can we understand this ideal without presupposing . . . alternative possibilities?


What is now commonly referred to as the Camino de Santiago is really a network of routes, many of Roman origin, extending throughout Europe that have been used regularly by pilgrims since the eleventh century to reach Santiago de Compostela. The various *caminos* are based on other historical pilgrimage roads to Santiago. The *camino inglés* (English way) led British pilgrims arriving by sea at La Coruña south to Santiago, the *camino portugués* (Portuguese way) brought pilgrims north, and the *vía de la plata* (silver way) was used by pilgrims from the south and center of the peninsula to join the *camino francés* (French/Frankish way) at Astorga.

The "Camino" now generally refers to the *camino francés* because it is and was the most popular for its infrastructure of pilgrims' refuges (*hospitales, or hospices*) and cities as well as monasteries, hermitages, and churches. (p. 5)
