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Your complimentary articles You've read one of your four complimentary articles for this month. You can read four articles free per month. To have complete access to the thousands of philosophy articles on this site, please If free will does not exist, what implications does this have for our ethical behavior, specifically for moral responsibility? And what does determinism – the idea that you could not have done otherwise than what you actually did – really imply for moral responsibility? The widely-held Principle of Alternate Possibilities states that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise. Thus if someone is said to have a level of control over their actions and a choice between two options – to do or to not do something – then they can be considered as morally responsible for their actions. Conversely, if they lack a real ability to choose between two options (for instance because determinism is true) then they cannot be considered as morally responsible for their actions. This includes if a person was being influenced by external or internal force. For instance, if I hold a gun to your head and tell you to open the bank vault, you are not morally responsible for doing so. In his 1969 essay 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', the philosopher Harry Frankfurt famously rejected the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, deeming it to be false and arguing that sometimes "a person may well be morally responsible for what he has done even though he could not have done otherwise" (p.185). Frankfurt illustrates this with an example about a manipulative control freak called Mr Black. Mr Jones has a choice between two courses of action, A and B, and Black has reasons for wanting him to choose A. But Black doesn't want to show his hand unnecessarily. He waits to see which way Mr Jones is inclined to go. If Jones looks like choosing A, all well and good. If Jones looks like choosing B then Black will take a hand, expertly manipulating the situation to guarantee that Jones chooses A. Mr Jones knows nothing of this and after some thought chooses A. Now, we know that Jones had no real control over the outcome – one way or another, he was going to do A. But Jones doesn't know that; he made his choice without any awareness of Black. Therefore, says Frankfurt, Jones bears moral responsibility for his action even though he could not have done otherwise. Therefore Frankfurt thinks the Principle of Alternate Possibilities should be replaced with the subtly different principle that "a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise." I will attempt to illustrate Frankfurt's point and further dispel the idea that determinism and moral responsibility are mutually exclusive through the example of Jack Skellington in Tim Burton's 1993 movie The Nightmare Before Christmas. Jack is going to demonstrate moral responsibility in a case where he could not have chosen otherwise: in this particular case, in relation to him not being able to choose otherwise than to ruin Christmas. I will argue that because of the reason behind his actions, Jack Skellington is morally responsible for ruining Christmas even though he could not have done otherwise, given the circumstances. To do this, I will examine what would make it impossible for Jack to have done otherwise. It's Christmas, but not as we know it.Film images © Disney 1993 The Plot Frankfurt's rejection of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities says that even when a genuine alternative choice to do otherwise is not available, that person is still morally responsible for their actions, if the reason for their actions is their own. Jack's underlying goal or reason for action in The Nightmare Before Christmas is to find a sense of fulfillment. Jack is de facto leader of Halloween Town. Coming down from a high from the success of yet another Halloween, Jack wanders into the forest to gain some clarity. There he stumbles upon seven doors, each with a shape corresponding to a holiday, such as a heart for Valentine's Day, an egg for Easter, and a shamrock for St Patrick's Day. Going through one of the doors, Jack finds himself in Christmas Town and soon becomes enthralled with the unfamiliar holiday, and obsessed with celebrating it. Jack later shares his findings with the monstrous citizens of Halloween Town, and as their leader, tells them to replicate Christmas-themed concepts and activities, such as giving presents and carol singing. He also sends a trick-or-treating trio, Lock, Shock, and Barrel, to kidnap 'Sandy Claws', so that he can take over Christmas in Christmas Town in Santa's stead. He orders them to keep Santa safe; but they deliver Santa to Oogie Boogie instead. Sally, Jack's love interest, warns Jack that his plan will end in disaster; but determined to find a sense of fulfillment, Jack dismisses Sally's warning. As Sally predicted, trouble ensues. Jack's Halloween-themed Christmas gifts assault and frighten the citizens of Christmas Town. His sleigh pulled by skeletal reindeer scares them and arouses suspicion towards 'Santa', so the military is called in. Jack is shot down, causing him to crash into a cemetery, where he reflects on the disasters he has unleashed. Downtrodden but undeterred, Jack sets out to find the real Santa and rescue him from Oogie's lair. Jack apologizes to Santa for his actions that caused Christmas to be so disastrous, before Santa leaves to fix things. After Santa finishes fixing Jack's catastrophe, as a gift, he makes it snow in Halloween Town. This allows Jack to finally feel a sense of fulfillment. Despite his having ruined Christmas, the events have reinvigorated his love for Halloween. Jack & Sally The Argument Jack's circumstances and abilities allow him to take over Christmas. However, these circumstances include a set of conditions that preclude him from running it successfully. As a result Jack seizes control of Christmas, but ruins it. Frankfurt states, "A person may do something in circumstances that leave him no alternative to doing it, without the circumstances actually moving him or leading him to do it – without them playing any role, indeed, in bringing it about that he does what he does" (p.186). Jack's circumstances preclude him from being able to take over Christmas successfully. However, these same circumstances do not play a role in his decision to take over Christmas. Neither do the possible consequences of his action of taking over Christmas influence his inclination to do so. He does so just because he wants to, not because he knows he will be successful, or not. Jack assigning his citizens to act (for example, by singing carols or kidnapping Santa Claus) and the ability to make things that emulate Christmas (for example, red suit, sleigh, presents), are necessary conditions for Jack to be able to take over Christmas. Jack needs to have presents to deliver to the children in Christmas Town, just like Santa, and a sleigh to be able to get around Christmas Town in a swift manner, as well as to look similar to the real Santa Claus. These are all necessary conditions for Jack to be able to launch his Christmassy coup. However, Jack enlisting his Halloween citizens to enact Christmas traditions does not provide sufficient conditions for Jack to be successful at running Christmas. What's more, Jack's circumstances – being the Pumpkin King, being spooky, being the leader of Halloween Town – precluded him from being able to choose otherwise. That is, Jack could not have chosen to not ruin Christmas. Acting spooky is all he and his fellow citizens know, even when attempting to emulate customs and actions that are inherently unspooky, such as singing Christmas carols, giving presents, and decorating Christmas trees. It was always going to end badly. Thus, having taken over Christmas, Jack had no choice other than to ruin it. In saying that, Jack nevertheless is more than the sum of his circumstances. That is to say, he did not take over Christmas only because he is the spooky Christmas-obsessed Pumpkin King etc; rather, he did so because he wanted to do so, in his search for personal fulfillment. Thus, Jack did have some sort of choice (free will) about taking over Christmas, although he then had no choice but to ruin it. Under these conditions, according to Frankfurt's reasoning, Jack should be considered morally responsible for ruining Christmas as, despite his circumstances making it impossible for him to avoid ruining it, Jack did what he did because he really wanted to. To requote Frankfurt, "a person may well be morally responsible for what he has done even though he could not have done otherwise" (p.185). In The Nightmare Before Christmas, it is clear that Jack Skellington is not able to do otherwise than to ruin Christmas. However, Jack takes charge of Christmas because of his own inclinations. Therefore, he is morally responsible for ruining Christmas, even though he could not have done otherwise. So, as Frankfurt suggests, the Principle of Alternate Possibilities does not hold up, because the ability to choose otherwise is not necessary for allocating moral responsibility. © Siobhain Lash 2020 Siobhain Lash is a PhD student in Philosophy at Tulane University in New Orleans. The Pumpkin King, Jack Skellington (Chris Sarandon[/actor/chris-sarandon] for speaking voice and Danny Elfman for singing), is a remarkably slender skeleton who has just finished another spooktacular Halloween. Despite the cheers and admiration from the residents of Halloweentown, he feels a deep sense of discontent and realizes that something crucial is absent from his life. Specifically, it could be the attention of Sally (Catherine O'Hara), a charmingly animated rag doll who harbors feelings for Jack, but he remains oblivious to her affections. Sally was fashioned by a sinister inventor in Halloweentown, the evil scientist (William Hickey), who keeps her imprisoned until she cleverly knocks him out by sneaking deadly nightshade into his soup.One night, while reflecting on his feelings of emptiness in a graveyard—where he inadvertently disturbs Sally, busy gathering more deadly nightshade—Jack takes a stroll with his ghostly dog Zero. Their adventure leads them to an unusual circle of trees, each marked with a door that symbolizes a different holiday. Curiosity draws Jack to open the door marked for Christmas, and he is suddenly whisked away into Christmastown. Overwhelmed with wonder, Jack finds the sights and sounds enchanting and yearns to merge into this new celebration.Returning to Halloweentown, Jack holds a town meeting to share his remarkable findings. His fellow townsfolk don't seem all that impressed, so he exaggerates the scarier elements of Christmas—such as the elusive Sandy Claws (Edward Ivory)—to capture their interest. However, his enthusiasm leads him to declare that they will take over Christmas. Jack starts assigning various tasks to his team: the evil scientist will create reindeer, and Halloweentown's mischievous trick-or-treaters are tasked with abducting Sandy Claws while Sally is commissioned to create Jack a Santa suit. Despite her warnings against such a disastrous plan, Jack's excitement blinds him to her concerns.In the midst of their preparations, the trick-or-treaters return proudly with the Easter Bunny. Jack sends them back and eventually they return with Sandy Claws, who surprises Jack by having hands instead of claws. Jack instructs the trick-or-treaters to make Sandy Claws comfortable, but in a twist of fate, they hand him over to Oogie Boogie (Ken Page) instead.Simultaneously, Sally successfully crafts a red suit (glaringly missing a hat, prompting Jack to take Sandy's) while the evil scientist's skeletal reindeer are harnessed to a sleigh filled with eerie toys. In a last-ditch effort to derail Jack's Christmas Eve plan, Sally attempts to sabotage him by adding fog juice to the town well, almost achieving her goal. But Zero, with his glowing nose, saves the day. Recognizing that only Sandy Claws can help Jack now, Sally bravely sneaks into Oogie Boogie's lair to rescue him.As Jack launches into his Christmas Eve journey in the sleigh, he proves to be utterly clueless about the holiday spirit. His idea of a suitable gift for a child results in chaos, featuring items like a shrunken head and a malicious toy duck. This ultimately leads to pandemonium wherever he goes, and he is shot down from the sky by panicking townsfolk. Coming to terms with his blunder and affirming his commitment to being the best Pumpkin King possible, Jack races back to Halloweentown to locate Sandy Claws and restore the Christmas spirit.In a climactic showdown, Jack confronts Oogie Boogie, liberates Sally and Sandy Claws, and brings Oogie's influence to an end. Santa Claus chastises Jack for trying to hijack another holiday and works his magic to save Christmas. As Jack and Sally return home, they witness the first snowfall brought by Santa, signifying a touch of magic in their lives. In a poignant moment amidst the snowflakes, Jack and Sally realize that their destinies are intertwined, and they were always meant to be together. What is the fundamental message of The Nightmare Before Christmas by American filmmaker Tim Burton?There are different interpretations of this remarkable movie based on how one perceives and understands the plot and individual facts. Here's my key to the fundamental message of The Nightmare Before Christmas. Perception is not impartial. We see a complex mix of who we are, what we have learned, and what we want to see. Like the author of the article "Things as they are" published in 1831 in the London-based newspaper The Atlas wrote:"We cannot see things as they are, for we are compelled by a necessity of nature to see things as we are. We never can get rid of ourselves."Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King from Halloween Town, falls into a swirling vortex that sucks him into Christmas Town, where he had never been before. A completely clueless Jack doesn't understand the meaning of Christmas. He cannot grasp why things are so different there than in his hometown. He returns to Halloween Town and wrestles intensively with Christmas for a while, until he gets what he believes to be a clue to decoding the meaning of it."What's this? What's this? There's colour everywhere! What's this? There are white things in the air! What's this? " (Jack Skellington in The Nightmare Before Christmas)In fact, Jack cannot see beyond the end of his nose, therefore he misinterprets everything, and takes over Christmas together with his followers. Christmas becomes a nightmare, a second version of Halloween. Jack is confronted with a different version of the world, which he cannot grasp. Because he is a prisoner of his own perception of reality. He tries in vain to decode Christmas, pretty much like in a hamster wheel. Because the mind is incapable of seeing beyond its own limits, he looks for an answer in rationality, which proves to be misleading.But Sally, who is secretly in love with Jack, can see the truth. She understands his misinterpretation and helps him see, so he can save Christmas in the end. Because Sally is the artist who sees through and beyond personal and cultural limitations. She doesn't see only for herself but can make others see, too.There's a happy end to this story: Sally and Jack unite in love. The power of the heart prevails over the obstacles of rationality. The heart is the seeing organ par excellence. With it we can "gaze into the stars" as Jack tells Sally.Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas shows the role of perception in the making of reality and the extent to which the limits of vision can impact human relationships. But it also illustrates the power of inner transformation and, ultimately, the capacity of the heart to distinguish between truth and appearances, which confirms that "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly." (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry)I'm firmly convinced that conscious seeing can help you unlearn the conventional ways and change your perspective on things. If you change the way you see and you start seeing differently, the world around you will change, too! As a consequence, creativity will be unlocked and artist block overcome. "Kidnap the Sandy Claws, beat him with a stick. Lock him up for ninety years, see what makes him tick." (The Nightmare Before Christmas) Thank you for reading till the end. If you've got something to add, please comment on this blog post below, drop me an e-mail or pm me on Instagram @the_pointless_artist. I'd love to hear from you!Via The Pointless Artist Blog and The pointless Artist Podcast, I support the creative energy of life and the artists who contribute to transforming this world into a freer, kinder, more inclusive, caring, transparent, and compassionate place to live. I firmly believe in the passion for art, the importance of sharing knowledge and experiences, and the power of personal stories to bring us together.To stay tuned and never miss a blog post, sign up for The Pointless Artist's email list below. Recognise your pointlessness and keep creating!#perceptionasreality #whatisreality With the festive season in full swing, The Nightmare Before Christmas is bound to be a mainstay on your December must-watch list. After watching this spooky Christmas special countless times, you may wonder what repeatedly draws us back to this timeless classic. On the surface, The Nightmare Before Christmas simply seems like a stylized way to warn people of the dangers of stealing, but there is something deeper within the folds of twinkling lights and carved pumpkins. Complexities and nuances are nestled within the characterization of the films' leads, making them intimately more human and hence influencing how the story is received. Jack Skellington Is Painfully Human in 'The Nightmare Before Christmas' Impulsive, inventive, and curious are all traits that define Jack Skellington (Chris Sarandon; Danny Elfman), especially as he fits about Christmas town singing "What's this?" He is driven by these qualities when he decides to make Christmas his own, excited by the novelty of these new sights and experiences. However, "Jack's Lament" also re-frames how we perceive Jack's selfish impulses, as it taps into the all-too-relatable quality of being unmbed by the same routine, year after year. Consequently, Jack's urge to branch out into something new is a completely human feeling, even if it is encroaching onto someone else's territory. In the documentary series, The Movies That Made Us, Elfman explains relating to that aspect of Jack's character, as he was growing "weary with the sound of screams" from his rock-star career. This informed how he sang Jack's songs in The Nightmare Before Christmas, with undercurrents of exhaustion, longing and eventual wonder when he finally finds an opportunity to escape the humdrum. This is what makes Jack so easy to connect with, as his character reflects the age-old discontent many people find with the repetitive 9-5 lifestyle. Image via Touchstone Pictures Sally's (Catherine O'Hara) character in The Nightmare Before Christmas took more time to flesh out as she began as a sort of femme fatale (The Movies That Made Us) but evolved into arguably the heroine of the film. When screenwriter Caroline Thompson was helping construct Sally's script and character, she recalls in an interview with the podcast ScriptApart "a sense of being left out, which later informed Sally enormously." Throughout the film, Sally is "seeking independence" from Dr Finkelstein, constantly escaping and fixing her patches up -- she is the epitome of self-reliance. Looking back, Thompson also feels Sally was "sort of enmeshed and enslaved in her adoration for Jack" (via ScriptApart). While Thompson is slightly disappointed with that outcome, it actually makes Sally's character more compelling and complex. Due to her isolation and fight for autonomy, Sally is an independent thinker, which is why she continuously disapproves of Jack's actions despite her heart and emotions being tied to him. On the surface, she may just seem like Jack's rag doll love interest, but the intriguing juxtaposition between her loyalty and quiet strength to disagree with him, encapsulated by "Sally's Song," allows her characterization to stand on its own. Layers of nuance also come into how The Nightmare Before Christmas characters approach Christmas, as they don't have malicious intentions and are certainly not trying to ruin the holiday season. Instead, they are truly just limited by their perspective and experiences; they try to bring joy in the only way they know how to. "And when Halloween Town tries to make presents for Christmas, they're doing their best!" explains director Henry Selick during the film's 30th anniversary. Just like in real life, most of the movie's characters aren't inherently evil, from Jack to Sally, they are simply engaging with the world with the knowledge they have. Due to these more complex characterizations, the story really becomes a journey of characters ranching out of their comfort zones, armed with their restricted experience, and growing together through disastrous consequences. While the message of "not stealing" is certainly applicable, the intricacies of the human condition, the need for novelty, isolation and emotion come into play. As such, Jack learns there is a way to revitalize his life without taking away from others, once again, reflecting the ageless concept of over-turning the 9-5 cycle for something more fulfilling but without harming anyone. This complexity also shifts their functions in the narrative, as Sally isn't necessarily the love interest Jack "wins" for completing his character arc. Instead, their love is both of their rewards, as Sally also maintains her steadfast resilience and autonomous thinking despite her emotional attachment to the troublesome Jack. Through these innately human experiences woven into these enigmatic and fantastical characters, it makes sense that we revisit The Nightmare Before Christmas time and time again. The Nightmare Before Christmas is available to stream on Disney+ in the U.S. WATCH ON DISNEY+ Jack Skellington, king of Halloween Town, discovers Christmas Town, but his attempts to bring Christmas to his home causes confusion. 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