

A NOTE ON DETERMINISM AND DELIBERATION

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we take metaphysical standpoint and examine what would be the consequences for deliberation if the thesis of determinism is true and if libertarianism is true. We take that deliberation is an active rather than passive process. We try to show that if determinism is true, then there is no, in fact, anything like deliberation. Moreover, if determinism is true, subjects cannot not to enter their chain of thoughts, if it is determined by initial states and laws of nature. Under determinism, any event, so any chain of thoughts as well, is fully determined, as well as there is the only one determined outcome of such a chain. If libertarianism is true, then one who thinks that determinism is true can deliberate in fact, although he is wrong about the metaphysical structure of his world. We explore some other details as well.

KEY WORDS

deliberation, determinism, free will, libertarianism

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There is a debate about whether determinists, i.e. those who believe that determinism is true, can deliberate consistently. One can find various answers and arguments proposed and developed over the years [1-7]. In this note, however, we would like to take a somewhat different perspective in assessing this matter than usual. We think that we could profit if, presupposing the truth of determinism, we pose the question whether there is such a thing as deliberation in the first place. Answering this, according to our opinion, more fundamental metaphysical question, we shall have an answer that can serve as the basis for all other questions concerning deliberation, free will and free action. In that regard, we shall take a metaphysical point of view in assessing the issue of deliberation. Deliberation is important issue in the free will debate because it is a process whereby persons strive to make a decision what to do, i.e., to form the will which is then a basis for further action. Our argument is quite simple. Take the thesis of determinism: suppose determinism is true; therefore, any state of the world is causally determined by prior or initial states of the world and the laws of nature. Only one history of the world is possible if determinism is true. Each and every state of the universe inevitably and uniquely follows from initial states and the laws that obtain. We assume that, both past (especially when there were no people) and the laws of nature are as they are and are beyond any control of any agent¹ (e.g. human beings).

Mental states, events and processes are also parts of our world, as well as physical things, states and processes. If we suppose that determinism is true, then this supposition equally applies to both physical and mental states and processes². If so, mental states, events and processes are also fully determined by previous or initial states of the world and the laws of nature. So:

- (1) initial states of the world and the laws of nature causally determine every subsequent state, be it physical or mental.

So, if determinism is true, everything that happens extramentally, and everything that happens mentally as well, is just a consequence of certain initial states and the laws of nature. Both kinds of processes are inevitable because they uniquely follow from previous or initial states and the laws of nature. So, they cannot be otherwise; there can be only one unique unfolding of the universe.

However, we will not take the path defended by Van Inwagen [1] according to which a person cannot deliberate if she believes that determinism holds. The argument commonly referred as “the belief in ability thesis” holds that such a person would hold inconsistent beliefs if she continues to “deliberate” despite having the belief that determinism holds. The argument and its details have been rejected and defended in the philosophical literature [4, 6]. Rather, as announced, our argument goes metaphysically “deeper”. That is, we center our position around metaphysical consequences of the determinism thesis. Concerning the question of holding inconsistent beliefs, we shall demonstrate that a person can hold inconsistent beliefs simply because it is not up to the person which beliefs she will hold if determinism is true.

Taking causal determinism to be a well-known philosophical thesis, we don't see any need for its detailed exposition here. Similarly, in line with (1), we proceed by accepting the claim that in a fully deterministic world, mental states, events and processes cannot escape full blown determinism. This is a claim that arises from the thesis of determinism. Burden of proof, we take, afflicts those that claims otherwise. However, the notion of deliberation does demand a more detailed discussion, and our argument will be grounded in a correct understanding and use of the notion of deliberation in the free will debate. When we explicate what is deliberation in more detail, we can see that abovementioned thesis of determinism could be applied to deliberation because deliberations are processes which obtain in the world. Then we can see what consequences follow for the notion of deliberation, if determinism is true. According to our understanding, deliberation is, first and foremost, an active mental process. It is a process where the person doing the deliberation – the deliberator – is producing or bringing about the final product on his own.

So, what, exactly, is deliberation and what does it mean to do it on one's own? Coffman and Warfield offered the following definition in order to deal with van Inwagen's and Searle's [1, 9] incompatibilist arguments: "to deliberate is to try to choose what to do from among a number of incompatible courses of action under certain conditions" [8; p.28]. As noted by Pereboom and Henden [6, 10], among others, Coffman and Warfield's [8] characterization puts the act of deliberation after weighing and evaluating has been completed. We agree with Pereboom and Henden that deliberation is not just the act of choosing but the whole mental process which involves weighing and evaluating options and ends with choosing as the final step of this process. Deliberation, then, is a complex mental process involving at least two options which are weighed and evaluated. It consists, broadly speaking, of evaluating, comparing, weighing of all beliefs, desires, inclinations, reasons, emotions, etc. with the aim of reaching a certain decision about what to do (in near or perhaps more distant future). Various mental items are assessed and examined before the decision is reached, whereby inference plays some role as well.

For van Inwagen, a clear-cut act of deliberation which requires the belief in one's ability to choose is when there are equally good reasons to choose one or the other option. A deliberator then adds "the extra something" to select one or the other option. Following this, Henden offers the following characterization of deliberation:

"the serious deliberator takes the difference maker to be her act of making an extra effort aimed at choosing itself. In other words, in order for her activity of deliberating to have the point of settling which alternative is chosen in the absence of reasons decisively favoring either alternative, and ultimately to act on the basis of this choice, she must assume it is her own act of making an extra effort aimed at choosing in order to settle which alternative is chosen that is the difference maker among her alternatives" [6; p.329].

Although we find this characterization preferable to the one offered by Coffman and Warfield, we believe that it still does not emphasize to a considerable degree the fact that deliberation is a mental process extended in time and initiated, controlled and terminated by the agent. Therefore, we offer the following definition of deliberation on which we ground our argument:

- (2) deliberation is an extended mental process of weighing, and eventually choosing, by the agent's extra effort(s) one of the mutually incompatible alternative choices.

We purposely label it as extended since we take it to be a process which takes some time and ends with a decision. Therefore, we do not take deliberation to be a point in time in which the choosing has happened. Even if quick, deliberation still involves some amount of time. Arguments laid down by van Inwagen, Searle or Henden in favor of incompatibilist deliberation are centered around the presence of the ability or at least recognizing by the deliberator her own ability to choose one or the other option. We agree that an extra effort seems pointless³ (with, as we will argue, some exceptions) if, as Henden [6; p.329] argues, "you believe the outcome of your choice solely depends on prior states or events". However, we shall dwell on metaphysical situation of the deliberator to see whether deliberation is at all possible in the case of determinism. Therefore, for one to truly deliberate, one has to be in a metaphysically appropriate position which enables the corresponding mental process to be characterized as genuine act of deliberation.

More importantly, and already pointed out, we take deliberation to be an active rather than passive mental process. It is not something we undergo; it is something we undertake. In that regard, deliberation requires a deliberator – an agent in a full-blown sense – doing something on her own and engaging extra efforts to be in control of that mental process. We should point out that the deliberator (agent) is not in control of the mental process if this process is, assuming

determinism, a causal consequence and follows uniquely from initial states and the laws of nature. As we understand deliberation, to be a deliberator requires having a complete control of all, or at least a good portion of, mental processes involved in the process of deliberation, regardless of whether one believes that the choice is already determined or not. So:

(3) deliberation is an active rather than a passive mental process.

Consider now the case from Levy involving the “deliberator” and the predictor in the style of Newcomb’s problem:

“Sally finds herself in a room with two doors. She knows that one of the doors is locked and the other unlocked, but she doesn’t know which is which. She also knows that the unlocked door is the door that the predictor (an alien super-scientist, let us suppose), who is able to predict the decisions of human beings with 100% accuracy has predicted that Sally will choose” [2; p.457].

First, it is possible to interpret this example as if causal determinism is not true. For example, the super-predictor can follow Sally’s process of deliberation and for a slice of a second before Sally reaches for the door handle, unlocks the door that she is grabbing for. However, this is not how Levy takes the example. In his reading, Sally is aware of the fact that the predictor already knows what door she will grab because she is aware of predictor’s abilities and knows that causal determinism is true. It is because of his complete knowledge of her neurophysiology and of the laws of nature that he is able to predict her choice with 100% accuracy. But for Levy, Sally is able to deliberate and indeed she deliberates “because she knows that which door she will pass through is sensitive to the upshot of her deliberation” [2; p.457]. This is the claim that we wish to wholeheartedly oppose. According to our understanding of deliberation, Sally is not deliberating and here is why.

Let us say that Sally’s world is one where indeed causal determinism is true. Recall that in Levy’s example Sally is aware of that, as she is aware that the predictor knows with 100% accuracy which option she will choose. Then, for Sally, who knows all this, it is enough just to grab, without prior or further thinking, one of the doors, because if determinism is true and predictor is 100% sure, the doors she will go for will just be the unlocked doors. There is no need at all for Sally to deliberate if she knows all this. “What point there is to even try to deliberate?” – Sally might ask herself before reaching for the handle of the unlocked door. The final decision cannot be different from what it is and there is nothing that can be done otherwise. Action, or non-action, which follows from such a mental process cannot be otherwise if determinism is true. But if determinism is true in the sense that the unfolding of the universe uniquely follows from initial states and the laws of nature then Sally does not have any influence on her chain of thoughts, weighing, evaluating and choosing from “alternatives at her disposal”. She is not even responsible for, and does not initiate the thought of, expressing the despair over the futility of deliberation in such a case. After all, the process in question is not her action, but an exclusive product of past initial states and the laws of nature. Though this process has subjective features and, grounded in these subjective features, can make it appear as if she is bringing a decision on her own, it is not the case (assuming determinism), since even these subjective features are just consequences of initial states and the laws of nature. Sally simply does not have an active control over what and when she thinks and over what and when she does something.

Since she does not really undertake the mental process in question, we may say that Sally just “slips in” into this process rather than that she initiates it, controls it and brings it to an end. To borrow an apt metaphor from Velleman [11], Sally then serves merely as an arena for these processes to occur. So:

(4) no subject can initiate and control her mental processes in the deterministic world.

If determinism holds, then every step of any mental process, whether short and simple or long and complex, is determined and follows from initial states of the world and the laws of nature. Each of its steps cannot differ from what it is for its subject (“the deliberator”) who lives in a deterministic world because the laws nature and initial states of the world uniquely determine the course of these, mental, events. Moreover, it cannot be that this mental process does not occur if it is determined that such a sequence of thoughts is to happen. It is not possible not to enter the sequence of thoughts when they occur for a subject if determinism is true in the world where subject or deliberator finds himself. Whatever and whenever mental processes happen, they are inevitable to happen just as they happen and just when they happen because the laws of nature and its initial states fully and uniquely determine all such states. Initial states and deterministic laws fully determine (and in fact “control”) the subject – they determine and “control” the subject’s inner world as well as the outer world; they determine and “control” her thoughts and mental processes, the outcome of that process, as well as the subject’s behavior. All is then in the hands of deterministic laws and initial states, and nothing is in the hands of the subject. If determinism is true, the subject herself is “controlled by” initial states and the laws of nature.

By no means do we think that this amounts to (logical) fatalism. An outcome of “deliberation”, as the unfolding of the entire universe too, is causally determined by previous initial states and the laws of nature rather than by the truth value (“true”) of a certain proposition or a set of propositions asserting the outcome of some future event. “Inevitability” of events within deterministic universe follows from initial states and the laws of nature which reign in this universe and not from the truth values of propositions which are partly about the future, if there are any such truth values for such propositions in the first place⁴. However, it is neither the other way around, i.e., that the process of deliberation is set by its outcome. An outcome could have been different if either the initial states or causal laws of nature (or both) were different. Therefore, what Sally does and thinks is the result of these two “deterministic” factors and not destined by some future outcome nor a sole consequence of the truth value of a proposition, or a set of propositions, which, at some point in time, asserts the outcome of some future event.

Though, subjectively, it may seem to Sally that she initiates and does what she initiates and does on her own, this is not the case. She is under the grip of the deterministic laws of nature and initial states and so are her deeds. Therefore, to explain Sally’s thinking process and its result, any additional – independent, agential – control is redundant since it is fully causally explained by previous states of affairs and the causal laws. Moreover, since under determinism there is only one possible outcome of the thinking process, there is no real weighing between two or more outcomes. In other words, there is no deliberation. All is in the hands of causal laws and initial states; nothing is in the hands of the subject if “subject” is understood as capable to introduce a causal chain.

Finally, by taking into account all the previous premises, i.e., (1), (2), (3) and (4), we take the following conclusion to hold:

- (5) if determinism is true, there is no deliberation.

Differently put, if determinism holds, it is not possible that the course of any mental process could be different than it, in fact, is because every such process is a unique and sole product of the laws of nature and initial states. Moreover, it is not possible that the outcome of such a determined thought process (that would only seem as deliberation) could be different from the one it in fact is. It is also not possible, in the deterministic world, that the ensuing action could have been different, and this was not possible not only at the time of its occurrence, but already at the beginning of the world. If the metaphysical structure of the world in which determinism is true is as described, it is hard to call any mental process “deliberation”. What in fact happens is that the subject simply enters a chain of thoughts which proceeds to a certain outcome, determined long ago by initial states and the laws of nature. And the same goes for the action

ensuing from this chain of thoughts. Since the subject does not have any control over initial states and the laws of nature, she is not a deliberator, at least not in the above defined sense.

Now, let us suppose that libertarianism holds. Could a determinist deliberate in a libertarian world? Of course she could, although she would hold a false metaphysical belief about the structure of the libertarian world she lives in. But metaphysical structure of this world, as it is a libertarian world, allows (but does not impose upon) the subject to be in control of significant mental processes – the subject herself can begin such a process whenever she wishes. She can by herself terminate it too, and its outcome, together with the ensuing action, would not be determined just by initial states and the laws of nature (if there are any in a libertarian world). So, metaphysically speaking, determinist can deliberate in a libertarian world even though she has at least one false belief – that the world is deterministic. Such a belief can make the subject ineffectual, in the sense that she refuses to engage in deliberation believing that everything is already determined, but she would freely decide to be such. She would act (or maybe slip into impotency – refusing to engage in deliberation) on the grounds of her belief in determinism and not because of the initial states and the laws of nature which would inevitably have determined the subject to be ineffectual (refusing to engage in deliberation). Subjects in a libertarian world who believe in determinism are simply wrong about the metaphysical structure of their world, but this does not prevent them to truly deliberate in that world, since their mental processes are not determined by initial states and the laws of nature. Whether or not they would hold inconsistent beliefs is a different question.

To conclude, if determinism holds, then any mental process is fully determined in all its details just by initial states and the laws of nature. Therefore, metaphysically speaking, there can be no kind of mental process called “deliberation”. Since mental states have certain phenomenal features – content, subjectivity, etc. – it seems to the subject as if she is deliberating. So, in fact, if determinism is true, “deliberators” have only an illusion of being engaged in deliberation; they do not deliberate at all. Finally, subjects in the deterministic world can possess inconsistent beliefs if these are determined by initial states and the laws of nature. It is not up to the subject to hold such beliefs nor to reflect upon her rationality. The subject merely acts as an arena for these beliefs to arise and she cannot do anything about it since all is done just by the laws of nature and initial states in a unique, deterministic way.

REMARKS

¹God is, of course, a different story, but we do not wish to complicate things theologically. Besides, for our purposes here, this would be pointless.

²We are neutral regarding how mental states and processes are realized. Determinism can hold for non-physical states and processes. From the thesis of determinism, logically and conceptually follows, that if it applies to the whole universe, then, from the thesis, we suppose that anything in that universe functions deterministically; if applied to the universe where there are mental processes, whatever they are, and, at least for the sake of the argument, mental processes also fall under the deterministic unfolding of the universe.

³Although we shall argue, metaphysically speaking, that it is not always so.

⁴See for example Taylor [12; ch.6], and Ockham [13]. In some broad sense, determinism could be called “fatalistic” just because there is only one and unique unfolding of the entire deterministic universe, but since this is not the “product” of the truth value of “future contingents”, it is not appropriate to characterize determinism as fatalism [14]. Events in a deterministic universe, including thinking, “deliberating” and acting, are in some sense “inevitable” because the world is such and not because some propositions (about the future) are true. (As stated, we do not think that this amounts to (logical) fatalism, notwithstanding the fact that some people would certainly label it that way.)

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