

# The Question of Determinism

Greg Whistance-Smith  
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Philosophy 102  
University of Alberta  
Prof: Dr. Nathan Kowalsky

Determinism is the unfortunate belief that all of the events of the world have been pre-determined. I say unfortunate, because the consequences of this theory are revolutionary in the worst sense: every choice we (believe we) make has already been made, and our entire lives have been determined by an entity other than ourselves. This belief, understandably, breeds a deep and bitter pessimism: if we can do nothing to change our fate, then why should we care about our lives at all? Under determinism, my life is no longer *mine*, but instead, simply a life that I am allowed to perceive, as if I was watching a film where only the protagonist's viewpoint is shown. Here it would be easy to argue what most people assert when presented with determinism: that its extreme repercussions reflect just how false it is. I could accept this, but extreme theories have been proven true before, so another method seems fit. It should be noted that there are multiple theories that lead to determinism; here, I shall deal specifically with "baseless" determinism, and causal determinism, the most prevalent types. In both these cases I hope to show, with help from the Analytic philosopher Taylor, that determinism cannot be true.

Baseless determinism is just that, baseless. Due to its importance as a metaphysical question, the debate surrounding determinism has taken place since the pre-Socratics. And over the course of this debate, many philosophers have created theories out of thin air; the Rationalist Spinoza reflects this. In Spinoza's view, the universe is a big machine (called God) and we are simply cogs in it, having no control over the purposeless actions of the machine. This theory

*could* be true, but on the same token, my life *could* be an illusion; because this is so far removed from my reality, I cannot know its truth with any degree of certainty. This is frustrating, but allowing these unprovable ideas to limit our thoughts seems foolish; the fact that these theories are so far removed should cast serious doubt on their legitimacy. In contrast to all of this, causal determinism is based on the real-world conception of causality.

Causal Determinism argues that the events of the universe are simply one long chain of causes and effects that began at creation. This determinism still bears the aforementioned consequences, but because of its close association with causality, a concept that enjoys universal assent, it seems much more plausible. Mankind employs causality everywhere, as making sense of the world seems to demand its use. Causality is so fundamental to the human experience that Hume, who convincingly argued that we can have no empirical understanding of causality, asserts that perception of cause and effect is a natural human tendency<sup>1</sup>. If we did not perceive causality, we would have no idea of anything, and would quickly become overwhelmed by the constant flux taking place around us. For example, when it is raining I expect to see clouds in the sky, and would be horrified to see otherwise. The idea of cause/effect chains follows quite naturally; we can view these chains just as distinctly as the singular events themselves. And thus, it is a reasonable assertion that a chain of causes and effects has been taking place since creation; this can be true without determinism.

The situation becomes troublesome, though, when determinists assert that human behavior and actions are a part of this pre-determined chain of events. The idea of human freedom is completely marginalized: I *could* have made a different decision a moment ago, but something in the world would have been different, and for that thing to have been different, more difference would be required; this becomes a chain of difference that leads all the way to

creation. By highlighting two concepts that are just as fundamental to the human experience as causality: deliberation, and the feeling that “it is up to me,” Taylor underlines the fallacy of marginalizing freedom. If causality can be used to prove determinism, then these two concepts can surely be used to disprove it.

Deliberation is employed every time we make a decision, yet it cannot exist in a determined universe. Deliberation is not an easy concept to explain, but we have all experienced it; the weighing of courses of action and attempt to decide how to proceed. Deliberation is employed for simple choices like what to eat for dinner, and complex ones, like what career path to follow. As a concept, deliberation is quite esoteric, but as we have all experienced it, I will not attempt to fully explain it; instead, I will highlight a few key characteristics. Firstly, we can only deliberate on our own actions; the process can only affect our choices. Secondly, we can only deliberate about the future; it cannot affect the past or present. Thirdly, we can only deliberate about situations in which we are free to act; I cannot deliberate about going for a walk if I am incarcerated. And finally, we can only deliberate regarding actual decisions; if there is nothing to decide, there can be no deliberation. This final point highlights the complete incompatibility with determinism; if we are determined, we would not be deliberating at all, because the conclusion of our deliberation would be decided at the outset. It seems odd that a process so engrained in our human experience would contradict the framework of the universe.<sup>2</sup>

The feeling that “it is up to me” is an equally important part of being human. In at least some situations, we feel in control; on the most basic level, this means having control over our bodies. As with deliberation, it is an esoteric concept, but it is a feeling we are all familiar with, and it is why we want to immediately reject determinism. The feeling that “it is up to me” is necessary for any deliberation to take place at all: when a situation is not up to me, all I can do is

speculate, and speculation is nothing like deliberation. This belief, then, also contradicts determinism. To prove determinism wrong this way, it is necessary to formulate a system where causality works together with deliberation and “it is up to me”, because if this is impossible, then either causality or “it is up to me” must be false.<sup>3</sup>

Taylor’s Theory of Agency provides just this system. This theory accepts causality, but goes one step further, allowing new cause/effect chains to originate with people. People are “agents” who can originate causes out of nothing. Admittedly, this is a strange system that empowers man as a type of creator, and Taylor himself seems hesitant to accept it. But to reject causality, deliberation, or “it is up to me” seems unacceptable. These three notions are deeply engrained in our lives, and it only follows that if our reality is not an illusion, whatever system orders the universe should not contradict these notions.<sup>4</sup>

To accept determinism of any kind would require the acceptance that we are living illusions, believing that we have power over ourselves. This situation could be the true, but as we cannot know for certain, it seems prudent to place importance on our human experience, asserting that we have control over our fate, and that we are not determined.

#### Notes

1. David Hume, “Of the Idea of Necessary Connection,” in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1977), 39-46, 49-53, 29-30.

2. Richard Taylor, “Freedom and Determinism,” in *Metaphysics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983), 37-38.

3. Taylor, “Freedom and Determinism,” 38-39.

4. Taylor, “Freedom and Determinism,” 48-50.