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What if Determinism is True? Not One, but Two Curious Consequences

This paper examines two consequences of determinism being true. First, I revisit – though in a revised form – the argument that if determinism is true, then knowledge, as it is typically understood, is impossible, and we cannot know the truth of determinism itself. I then develop a second consequence arising from this peculiar epistemic position: namely, that we are left with a contrary alternative to opt for.

Keywords: determinism, ontic structure of reality, human epistemic condition, first paradox of determinism, second paradox of determinism

Słowa kluczowe: determinizm, ontyczna struktura rzeczywistości, ludzkie uwarunkowanie epistemiczne, pierwszy paradoks determinizmu, drugi paradoks determinizmu

E.Z. in memoriam

1. Introduction

My paper is about two peculiar consequences of determinism being true. The first is similar to what has been repeatedly presented and analyzed.¹ However, it seems to me that this has been presented misleadingly, in that it is claimed that determinism is self-refuting. I myself want to insist that what may be self-refuting is a determinist, not determinism. If determinism is true² and if knowing is still understood as a result of inquiry and deliberation, we find ourselves in an epistemic limbo because we are unable to

1 Apparently since T. Honderich's *A Theory of Determinism. The Mind, Neuroscience, and Life-Hopes*, Oxford 1988, p. 361–375, the issue has interested philosophers much less. For example, in C. Hofer, *Causal Determinism*, [in:] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by E.N. Zalta and U. Nodelman, 2023, plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/determinism-causal [accessed 07.03.2024] there is no mention of it at all.

2 Since my point is theoretical and is about the consequence of determinism *if* it is true, I do not need to know whether it is true, let alone argue whether it is true or false nor even present arguments for either. I leave it for another paper. In Sections 3 and 4, I only say a word or two about why it might make sense to opt for either option at all and in Section 5, I shall argue that, if determinism is true, it can neither be demonstrated nor even known.

know about determinism in particular and about anything else at all in general. However, surprisingly, if this is correct, such an epistemic situation has a further consequence: we are left with only one epistemic way out, namely opting for the opposite of determinism being true. If so, any paradox of determinism is twofold, with the second consequence being even more puzzling, as it spurs us towards the opposite of determinism.

My paper proceeds as follows: first, I spell out how I understand determinism, emphasizing the distinction between epistemic and ontic approaches, and briefly address a view opposed to determinism. Then – though only as side notes – I present reasons for rejecting determinism, followed by reasons for accepting it, in order to arrive at my main argument about the epistemic trap that arises if determinism is true. Finally, I elaborate on a further epistemic consequence of this trap and conclude with a few closing remarks.

2. Three distinctions

Before I begin, it is useful to make three preliminary clarifications: 1) the meaning of determinism, 2) determinism considered from ontic and epistemic perspectives, and 3) what is typically understood as the opposite of determinism.

2.1. Facets of determinism

Since determinism 'has been given various, usually imprecise definitions,³ it is helpful to explain what I mean by this term. Insofar as my scope is neither physics nor the physical sciences, I prefer not to adopt a 'loose and (nearly) all-encompassing' one: 'Determinism is true of the *world* if and only if, given a specified *way things are at a time t*, the way things go *thereafter* is fixed as a matter of *natural law*,⁴ where 'natural law' is meant as a law of nature as conceived in physical sciences. Rather, I consider 'determinism [as] say[ing] that a system's future is fully determined, or specified, by its present state and the forces that will act upon it'⁵ or – given that I will speak mostly about the human realm – as 'the family of doctrines that human choices and actions are effects of certain causal sequences or chains.'⁶ Interestingly, determinism thus understood, and laws involving not only physics but also physiology, sociology, psychology, etc.,⁷ may be applied more universally. For example, when speaking about an immaterial realm and a region above the heavens (*hyperouranion*), Plato seems to assert a kind of determinism. As he explains, the destiny of pre-existing souls, depicted as chariots, depends on the skills of their charioteers. If those skills are poor, the result is the embodiment of the souls.⁸ This is intriguing because, in the *Phaedrus*, the soul is ungenerated and thus *causa sui*. Plato's thesis is even stronger

3 C. Hofer, *Causal Determinism*.

4 Ibidem.

5 J. Scheffel, *Emergent Will*, philpapers.org/archive/SCEWEI-4.pdf [accessed 08.03.2024].

6 T. Honderich, *Determinism as True, Both Compatibilism and Incompatibilism as False, and the Real Problem*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. by R. Kane, Oxford 2002, p. 464.

7 Consequently: if these are laws of physics, we deal with physical determinism; if laws of psychology – with psychological determinism, etc.

8 See Plato, *Phaedrus*, [in:] *Platonis Opera*, vol. 2, ed. by J. Burnet, Oxford 1901, 247c–248b. In what is believed to be his ultimate work, Plato considers the human race to be puppets of God. See idem, *Laws*, [in:] *Platonis Opera*, vol. 5, ed. by J. Burnet, Oxford 1907, 644d and 803c.

than what Strawson objects to,⁹ since it suggests that a *causa sui* soul is determined by its own constitution.

2.2. Ontic vs epistemic approach¹⁰

I also need to insist on a distinction between our cognition and reality itself.¹¹ The distinction concerns determinism understood, on the one hand, as a set of sentences – a theory – formulated by us about the ontic structure of reality, and, on the other hand, the ontic structure of reality itself. The ontic structure of reality may be deterministic. If it is deterministic, there is no contradiction in reality's being deterministic. Instead, if determinism is true, such an ontic structure of reality has an impact on our epistemic condition. Determinism is often ridiculed by saying that a certain and reliable prediction is impossible. This incapacity, however, is a feature not of reality – which is or is not deterministic – but of a predictor who is in such epistemic condition as to be incapable of prediction. Reality runs independently of whether it is being predicted. In other words, determinism being the case is an ontic problem, whereas a formulation of a theory of determinism is an epistemic one.¹²

2.3. Determinism and its opposite

I also need to address the alternative to determinism – in fact, its opposite – as I cannot entirely avoid mentioning it in this paper. This is often referred to as 'indeterminism'. However, this term is negative in form and therefore defines itself only by negation of determinism. It tells us more about what it is not than about what it is, and is thus potentially confusing or, at best, equivocal.¹³ What, then, is the positive opposite of determinism? It

9 See G. Strawson, *The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility*, "Philosophical Studies" 1994, vol. 75, issue 1/2, p. 5 and 7.

10 J.N. Jordan (in: *Determinism's Dilemma*, "The Review of Metaphysics" 1969, vol. 23, issue 1, p. 62–63) is the only author I know of who made this distinction explicitly: 'a misleading shift of perspective between the argument [...] a transition from the epistemological to the ontological.'

11 The distinction may be obscured by the fact that our cognition is a part of reality and, it can be added, we know reality via our cognition. Here and in what follows, I set it aside.

12 See A.A. Snyder, *The Paradox of Determinism*, "American Philosophical Quarterly" 1972, vol. 9, issue 4, p. 356: 'even if it be logically impossible to prove the Deterministic Doctrine, the proposition which it expresses could be nonetheless true.'

13 See T. Müller, A. Rumberg, V. Wagner, *An Introduction to Real Possibilities, Indeterminism, and Free Will: Three Contingencies of the Debate*, "Synthese" 2019, vol. 196, p. 1, in which the authors rightly claim that 'characteriz[ing] indeterminism purely negatively, as the negation of determinism' is 'the standard conception of indeterminism [...], and a positive characterization of indeterminism may seem hard to come by.' That 'determinism is positively characterized while indeterminism is considered its mere negation' is considered by them 'the contingency' (ibidem, p. 6). They agree (ibidem, p. 2) that 'a positive characterization lends itself to theory construction, whereas a merely negatively characterized position is in the defensive' and offer the following one: 'indeterminism can be defined as the existence of multiple real possibilities for the future: an indeterministic world provides more than one option for how the future can unfold' in which case 'determinism is then just the negation of indeterminism, and is characterized as the lack of multiple real possibilities for the future.' I wonder whether such a manoeuvre is truly clever or merely a verbal reversal. The real issue, in fact, is to demonstrate how more than one future outcome is genuinely possible. After all, to my mind, the burden of proof lies with the proponents of multiplicity. Yet typically, we are better at explaining how an event has happened than how it will happen. See, for example, K. Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, London 2005, p. 185: 'when with the benefits of hindsight one begins to search one's past for such 'turning points,' one is apt to start seeing them everywhere.' Moreover, explanations given *post factum* are generally more complete than those given *ante factum*. This is largely because an event is typically better understood after it has oc-

is not easy to ascertain. For example, many refer to ‘chance’ and ‘randomness’. However, both chance and randomness are epistemic categories, and they are often used to mask our ignorance.¹⁴ Tossing a coin, for example, is generally considered a typical random practice. However, it may be considered random only if one ignores initial conditions and the laws of mechanics ‘naturally tossed coin obey’. In fact, ‘coin tossing is “physics” not “random”’.¹⁵ Accordingly, appealing to chance or randomness involves using an epistemic category where an ontic category is required.

The only positive opposite of determinism that I can conceive – concerning the ontic structure of reality, not our epistemic state – is chaotism. But what does it mean, if we aim to provide an ontic explanation rather than an epistemic one (the latter being easy, as it simply amounts to unpredictability)? For example, Bishop noted that ‘the question of defining chaos is basically the question what makes a dynamical system such as (1) chaotic rather than nonchaotic. But this turns out to be a hard question to answer!’¹⁶ He then adds (after Kellert): ‘two key features that are simultaneously present: instability and aperiodicity’ to conclude that chaos is ‘thoroughly under studied by philosophers.’¹⁷ It is obvious that the two features are negative, which does not help us if we look for a positive opposite of determinism.¹⁸

If I tried to define chaotism as an alternative to determinism, I would describe it in the following manner: the same *a*, in identical circumstances, produces *b* or *c* – or *d* or something else – indifferently. I can state this, but to be honest, I cannot imagine how strictly the same *a* in strictly identical circumstances could produce *b* or *c* – or *d* or anything else – indifferently. This claim, similarly to the earlier assertion that chaotism is the only positive opposite of determinism, is ultimately epistemic: it only reflects my belief, and as

cured than before. Even if I am confident about what I will do in the next moment, I cannot be certain – that is, 100% certain – that I will succeed until it has actually been done, even if I succeed in most cases. The reason is that I do not know all the factors and circumstances that may arise – or those that ultimately will come to the fore. Ahead of choosing ‘[a] plurality of alternatives is open to the person’ and ‘the person herself determines which alternative she pursues’ (cf. R. Clarke, J. Capes and P. Swenson, *Incompatibilist (Nondeterministic) Theories of Free Will*, [in:] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by E.N. Zalta, 2021, plato.stanford.edu/entries/incompatibilism-theories [accessed 25.03.2024]). Now – is it so, or does it only seem so? Certainly, it seems so: before choosing, it appears as though several alternatives were available. But what about the former? Is it truly so, or is that merely a way of speaking – because the alternatives are either unknown, or, if known, only vaguely so; that is, without knowing exactly how they will be realized?

- 14 See C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, London 1859, p. 131: ‘chance. This, of course, is a wholly incorrect expression, but it serves to acknowledge plainly our ignorance of the cause of each particular variation.’ See also W. James, *The Dilemma of Determinism*, [in:] W. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York 1897, p. 153–154: ‘chance means nothing of the kind. It is a purely negative and relative term, giving us no information about that of which it is predicated, except that it happens to be disconnected with something else – not controlled, secured, or necessitated by other things in advance of its own actual presence [...] it tells us nothing about what a thing may be in itself to call it “chance”.’
- 15 P. Diaconis, S.P. Holmes and R. Montgomery, *Dynamical Bias in the Coin Toss*, “SIAM Review” 2007, vol. 49, issue 2, p. 211.
- 16 R. Bishop, *Chaos*, [in:] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by E.N. Zalta, 2015, plato.stanford.edu/entries/chaos [accessed 21.03.2024].
- 17 Ibidem.
- 18 I was once told that in Naples, there are no rules for driving. But what would that actually mean? If there are no rules, does everyone simply drive however they please? And if so, isn’t that itself a kind of rule? Such a rule would consist of numerous sub-rules – namely, the individual driving styles of each driver – meaning there are as many sub-rules as there are drivers. But if there were truly no rules at all, how would anyone drive? Without rules, yes, but how, exactly? By asking this, I expect an answer that contains some positive content, just as driving itself is a positive action rather than merely an absence of action.

such, may be false. Therefore, neither of these beliefs constitutes an argument against the possibility of another alternative to determinism, or against the soundness of chaotism itself. They simply make me, at this stage, more sympathetic to determinism than to its opposite. Before turning to my main point, however, I want to consider why it makes sense to entertain both the opposite of determinism and determinism itself. I believe this is necessary to understand why it is reasonable to hesitate between the two. After all, neither has been successfully or definitively proven.

3. Why might it make sense to try to demonstrate that determinism is false?

Consider that I am offered either coffee or tea. It seems – that is, it seems to me – that I can choose either one, both, or neither. (Certainly, we could add more details: drink it in 5 or 6 minutes, alone or with a friend, and so on.) This situation is clearly very different from being coerced to take a coffee when I actually want tea, which I would otherwise have. This difference is telling, and it is also reflected in how I feel in each scenario. In the former case, I am glad because I get what I wanted, whereas in the latter, I am rather frustrated because something happened against me. The difference may also lie in identifying the source of wanting tea as internal and the source of taking coffee as external. Many people typically refer to such cases,¹⁹ and a lack of – visibly felt – coercion is sufficient for them to argue against determinism.²⁰ Although it is hard to deny that there is a difference between the two – and this is clear from the fact I could not confound the one (being glad) with the other (being frustrated) – there is a question whether this difference suffices to consider the former as undetermined or self-determined against the latter, the determined. For one can easily question why I went for either one, both, or neither, and if I answer that I did so because I wanted to, one may go on asking: why did you want to? And so forth. Alternatively, consider another example: I am strongly convinced that I am writing now as a result of my own choice, and that what I am writing is the product of my deliberation. But is it really so? Perhaps the determinist is right that this action of mine is entirely the result of a deterministic process, even if that seems to me nonsensical, impossible and contrary to my strongest conviction.

Furthermore, what about cases where things do not go as I intend – for example, when I kick the ball but not the way I meant to? Or when I play a false note? It seems clear that playing what I intend and playing clumsily are different experiences. But is the extent of my success relevant to whether I am self-determining or determined? I perform

19 For a similar example, see M. McKenna and D.J. Coates, *Compatibilism*, [in:] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by E.N. Zalta and U. Nodelman, 2024, plato.stanford.edu/entries/compatibilism [accessed 04.08.2025]: ‘consider the choice to pick up a cup of coffee as opposed to the event of one’s heart beating or one’s blood circulating. In the latter cases, one recognizes events happening to one; in the former, one is the source and producer of that happening.’ I am not sure I agree with the interpretation of their coffee example. First, does recognizing amount to *knowing for sure*? Next, is one ‘the source and producer of that happening’ – or is that simply what one believes or feels? Certainly, one contributes to such events, but that is not same as *being the source*. I have similar doubts about another of their examples (Zappa and Hendrix): Why would Zappa have played the guitar? Why at that particular moment? And – perhaps most importantly – why would he have wanted to make Hendrix happy?

20 On ‘any action [...] considered free until proven coerced,’ see F. Paglieri, *There’s Nothing Like Being Free. Default Dispositions, Judgments of Freedom, and the Phenomenology of Coercion*, [in:] *Decomposing the Will*, ed. by A. Clark, J. Kiverstein and T. Vierkant, Oxford 2013, p. 143 and his discussion, p. 143–150.

better than worse because I am talented or have practised. But none of this undermines my being determined: I was determined to prepare myself, just as someone else might be determined not to prepare. Playing well, playing together, and improvising together all suggest a teleological framework – one plays to harmonize with others or to create something new. Yet again, why does one do so? Why do people play, and why do they desire harmony? Is this truly purposeful, or does it merely give that impression? We might then reframe the question: why does one act with purpose at all? Why this purpose rather than another? Why in this way and not another?

It has become customary, and part of everyday conversation, to resist determinism in this way, especially since it is commonly felt this way. Yet the fact that this is a convenient way of speaking – and has been in use for centuries – does not in itself constitute an argument, let alone a positive one.²¹ It may be a useful shorthand for otherwise complex processes. Think, say, about sunrise and sunset. What is called so is not so. Even though we understand how these phenomena occur, we rarely experience them in the way they actually happen. For instance, when I contemplate the sunset, I do not realize that I am moving together with the Earth as it orbits the sun, rather than the other way around. After all, how should we speak if, each time one wanted to speak of sunrise or sunset, one were to describe these phenomena the way they are?

To resume. To the question of why I opted for tea rather than for coffee – or vice versa, or for both, or for neither – I can answer, I think, in two ways:

- a) giving a reason (and it may be the right one or only the one I believe to be the right one, but which in reality is the wrong one), which will call for a reason of a reason, etc.;
- b) I give no reason, answering 'I do not know', 'Just because', or something of the kind, which means that I do not know the reason, not that there is none.

4. Why might it make sense to try to demonstrate that determinism is true?²²

Many arguments in favour of the opposite of determinism are based on impressions commonly shared. Since determinism sounds offensive and seems to diminish our elevated status, it is difficult to accept. As a result, its opposite has long become the default view. However, it is remarkable that, already centuries ago, Plato held 'a very mean opinion [...] of the human race,' even though, as he admitted, he 'had [his] mind set on God.'²³ If, for my purposes, I replace 'God' with the 'universe,' of which human beings are elements, a similar effect is achieved.

21 Van Inwagen argues that determinism cannot be true because if it were, there would be no inquiry any more. See P. van Inwagen, *An Essay of Free Will*, Oxford 1983, p. 154, on 'argument proceed[ing] from the fact that we deliberate.' But why to take for granted that we deliberate? Is this not what should be demonstrated and if determinism is true we cannot demonstrate it? If determinism is true, it is true regardless of our beliefs in our deliberating and all other consequences we prefer not to accept. Negating determinism because of its unacceptable implications is a fallacy. Similar arguments abound, for example, in: T. Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*, p. 420: 'since we do have knowledge, determinism is false.'

22 By raising this question, I partly disagree with, among others, P. van Inwagen, who, in his *An Essay of Free Will*, asserts that 'belief in determinism is – at least at the present time – wholly unjustified' (p. 204). My view is that determinism is, or at least appears to be, partly justified.

23 Plato, *Laws*, [in:] *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 11, transl. by R.G. Bury, Cambridge MA, London 1968, 804b.

The determinist may easily respond to the opponent of determinism by arguing that the distinction between coercion and the absence of coercion may be insignificant, as it pertains primarily to phenomenology. For example, external coercion may be internalized and subsequently identified as one's own, or one may be manipulated in such a way that one acts exactly as the manipulator intends. Conversely, an internal impulse (such as compulsion, addiction, or hallucination) may be felt as foreign, and thus as a form of external coercion. Therefore, the move from not being *visibly* coerced to not being *determined* is far from obvious. The difference is not one of essence but of degree – specifically, the degree to which being determined is visible. In other words, the issue concerns *determination-plus-coercion* versus *determination simpliciter*, rather than a contrast between determination felt as coercion and the supposed absence of determination simply because coercion is not felt.²⁴ If all we rely on is how it feels to be coerced or not coerced, such impressions – however conspicuous, '*bien claire[s]* & *distincte[s]*,'²⁵ – are merely indicators of how one feels and reveal little about the actual nature and origin of those feelings.

The opposite of determinism – since it relies solely or almost exclusively on human facts – seems like a weaker option. Therefore, opting for determinism appears to be the better choice, even though I would prefer the opposite to be the case. Determinism seems the stronger position because it is grounded in hard facts – that is, intersubjective and verifiable ones.²⁶ As such, it is less mysterious and more transparent than its opposite, and it tends to avoid *ad hominem*, *ad personam*, or highly idiosyncratic explanations, which are typical of subjectivity.

Nevertheless, reluctance to accept a deterministic account may stem not only from its complexity, but also from the fact that it runs counter to the intuitions of those unaccustomed to it, and that it seems to strip human beings of their elevated status and esteem.²⁷ Happily, however, there is a more substantial – and rather paradoxical – reason for *not* opting for determinism, to which I now turn.

5. Determinism may be true, but if it is, epistemically it does not help

The motive for *not* opting for determinism is as follows: anyone who embraces determinism is confronted with a peculiar consequence – namely, that if determinism is

24 'Felt' may be replaced with 'experienced,' as in J.M. Boyle, *Is Determinism Self-Refuting?*, [in:] *Self-Reference. Reflections on Reflexivity*, ed. by S.J. Bartlett and P. Suber, Dordrecht 1987, p. 196: 'deliberate choices, for these are the part of human life in which people experience themselves as self-determining.' Here, experiencing self-determination is taken – in my view mistakenly – as sufficient to prove that choices are deliberate.

25 R. Descartes, *Méditations*, [in:] *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. 9, ed. by Ch. Adam, P. Tannery, Paris 1904, p. 25.

26 That this is a right criterion by itself and subjectivism is altogether and in every respect wrong should be proved. See, for example, E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 1: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, transl. by F. Kersten, The Hague 1983, §20, p. 37–39, on empiricism lacking an empiricist foundation of its universal theses. Subjectivism may not be a weak view by itself, since what is a weaker option from an objective point of view, is a stronger one from a subjective point of view and vice versa. But we lack an absolute criterion to know which of the two vantage points is better. See W. James, *The Dilemma of Determinism*, p. 150: 'evidence of an external kind to decide between determinism and indeterminism is, as I intimated a while back, strictly impossible to find.'

27 Accordingly, subscribing to the opposite of determinism would be akin to adopting a kind of Platonic 'noble lie.' See Plato, *Republic*, [in:] *Platonis Opera*, vol. 4, ed. by J. Burnet, Oxford 1904, 414b–c.

true, then their decision to adopt it is itself determined. (And if determinism is not true, then why adopt it in the first place?)

To begin with, two things should be said. The first point is that this argument has already been established in the past.²⁸ It is labelled as a self-defeating or self-refuting determinism argument.²⁹ The second point is that the argument, if interpreted in this manner, has been set up incorrectly. In fact, what is called the 'philosophical argument against determinism' or 'logical refutation of determinism'³⁰ is directed not against determinism but against our knowing about determinism, if not against any knowledge.³¹ To explain: if determinism is true, then it is simply true – there is no contradiction in that. The structure of reality cannot defeat itself, so long as it exists as it does. Reality – whether deterministic or not – may be described truly or falsely, but it cannot be mistaken. What can be mistaken are theories, arguments, or determinists themselves. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of a self-defeating theory or a self-refuting argument,³² rather than of self-refuting determinism,³³ since it is our formulations (theories or arguments) that can possess such features – not reality itself.

Now, if the ontic structure of reality is equivalent to determinism, this implies that reality is constitutionally deterministic in nature. However – and this is the crux – if determinism is true, it necessarily affects our epistemic condition. Our epistemic condition is itself a part of the ontic structure of reality and, as such, depends on it *ontically*. In contrast, the ontic structure of reality depends – if at all – on our epistemic condition only *epistemically*; that is, in the way it is known by us, but not in the way it exists.

If the above is correct, the deterministic structure of reality – if determinism is understood as universal, that is, with no exception, no isolated systems, and nothing

28 See S.M. Knaster, *How the Self-Defeating Argument Against Determinism Defeats Itself*, "Dialogue" 1986, vol. 25, issue 2, p. 244: 'DISDA [Determinism-Is-Self-Defeating Argument – R.Z.] fails because it leaves the truth or falsity of hard determinism an open question. Indeed, if we assume that hard determinism is true or might be true, we cannot justifiably claim to know the truth of DISDA; it defeats itself. So in order to claim that we know the truth of DISDA, we must also claim to know that hard determinism is false.'

29 For a discussion and participants, see T. Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*, p. 361–375.

30 W.M. Urban, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, New York 1930, p. 418.

31 See J.N. Jordan, *Determinism's Dilemma*, p. 50: 'The argument does not deny that their [i.e. determinists'] reasons might be good. It denies only that they could have ascertainably good reasons to think so.'

32 For example, A.A. Snyder, *The Paradox of Determinism*, p. 354: 'Determinist Doctrine is self-refuting.'

33 Several authors seem to confuse epistemic and ontic senses, and some of them not only verbally, insofar as they use both, 'determinism' and 'determinist' or 'argument' or similar, interchangeably. For example, J.N. Jordan, *Determinism's Dilemma*, p. 48: 'argument for determinism is "self-defeating"' but (p. 56): 'the determinism-is-self-defeating argument'; J.M. Boyle, G. Grisez and O. Tollefsen, *Determinism, Freedom, and Self-Referential Arguments*, "The Review of Metaphysics" 1972, vol. 26, issue 1, p. 30: 'The inconsistency in which a determinist finds himself is unavoidable; therefore [sic!], determinism is not only false but inevitably false' but (p. 34): 'the determinist thesis is self-refuting'; S.M. Knaster, *How the Self-Defeating Argument Against Determinism Defeats Itself*, p. 239: 'the truth of determinism implies that we cannot claim to know the truth of any proposition, then it follows, of course, that proponents of determinism cannot claim to know that determinism is itself true. Hence [sic!], the self-defeating nature of determinism'; and T. Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*, p. 361: 'To claim the truth of determinism is somehow self-defeating', and, on the same page: 'determinism [...] is self-defeating.' Also P. Churchland, *Is Determinism Self-Refuting?*, "Mind" 1981, vol. 90, p. 99, while arguing against determinism being self-refuting, does not distinguish enough between 'determinism' and 'determinist': 'determinism is self-refuting. The determinist, allegedly, can expect to be taken seriously just in case his theory cannot be taken seriously.' Likewise, J.M. Boyle, *Is Determinism Self-Refuting?*, p. 193 and 197: 'If determinism is incompatible with some feature of its own assertion, then we need look no farther to reject it [...] Self-refutation arises in propositions that are self-referential in a peculiar way.' Determinism, understood as the ontic structure of reality, is not itself an assertion or proposition; rather, only a theory (or something of that kind) *about* determinism can take the form of an assertion or proposition.

outside its scope – has an epistemically devastating effect on us, because deliberation and inquiry cannot be reconciled with a deterministic structure of reality. Determinism, if true, affects us in such a way that it nullifies what we are accustomed to conceptualizing as knowledge. It does so insofar as deliberation and genuine searching are excluded from the deterministic domain.

However, as things stand at present, we do not know whether determinism is true or false – or, as has been observed, ‘there is no agreement over whether determinism is true (or even whether it can be known true or false).’³⁴ If so, the current state of affairs can be presented as follows:

- (1) (Ontological state of affairs) Determinism is either true or false.
- (2) (Epistemological state of affairs) We do not know whether determinism is true or false; therefore, we do not know that it is true, and we do not know that it is false either.

Given (1) and (2), the following obtains:

- (3a) If determinism is true, we cannot know that it is false (although one may mistakenly believe that it is false). Moreover – and this is the point of the argument – (3b) *if* determinism is true, it cannot be known that it is true. (The final element (4) – what if determinism is false – will be addressed in due course, see Section 6 below.)

I think there is no issue with (1), at least insofar as determinism refers to something meaningful. (2) is also fairly obvious: there are those who believe, are convinced, or are even fanatical in asserting that determinism is true, and those who are equally convinced or fanatical in denying it. Yet so far, no definite demonstration has been provided for either position. I do not expect (3a) to be controversial either. My focus here and now is on (3b): not only do we not currently know – accidentally – whether determinism is true or false, but necessarily, it can never be known to be true, *if* it is in fact true. If determinism is true, human epistemic conditions depend not on human flaws – those which might be corrected through improvement and progress, as often happens over time – but rather on the ontic structure of reality itself, namely determinism. And since the ontic structure of reality is unmodifiable by us, so too is – and will remain – our epistemic condition.

This is why: knowledge, as typically understood, is the result of deliberation and inquiry – and deliberation relies on selection. If there is no selection, there is no deliberation, and without deliberation, there is no knowledge either. As Honderich once put it, determinist theory holds that:

each of the actions in our lives and also the choosing and willing of it is an effect. It is the effect of a sequence of events or states or properties, each of these also being an effect. The sequence starts further back than any first thought or feeling about the action, let alone the choosing or willing of it. Indeed the sequence goes back to events that are not thoughts or feelings at all. Each effect is what it sounds like, something that had to happen. There was no other possibility.³⁵

If this is so, then there is no true deliberation – and, consequently, no knowledge – because what I take to be my deliberation is not deliberation at all. What I deliberate over

34 C. Hoefer, *Causal Determinism*.

35 T. Honderich, *Philosopher: A Kind of Life*, London 2001, p. 7.

and think about is simply what I am determined to deliberate over and think about.³⁶ Clearly, this applies equally to those who believe determinism to be true – since they are determined to do so – as well as to those who believe it to be false – because they are likewise determined to believe that – and even to those who hesitate or remain agnostic, since they too are determined to do and to be just that.³⁷ If someone from one party convinces someone from another, this occurs not through argumentation or deliberation – since, under determinism, neither actually exists – but because the change of mind was determined to happen. Its occurrence may involve what appears to be argumentation and deliberation. (Certainly, if one marionette – say, Orlando – does not meet another – say, Angelica – the latter will not be met by the former.) Genuine deliberation – the kind that presupposes intellectual effort, autonomy, and independence from the object of inquiry – is ruled out by determinism, and therefore is an illusion. No proof exists either, and no demonstration worthy of the name can be made.

The same applies to analysis and selection, questioning and answering, the assessment of criteria and arguments, as well as to scientific research and philosophical inquiry. Certainly, one may happen to be correct that determinism is true – *if* it is true – or correct about anything else. But if one happens to be so, it is only because one is determined to be so, and if this is the case, one will not even know it.³⁸ As a result, if determinism is true, the fundamental problem is not merely that human beings are deprived of the ways they are accustomed to thinking about themselves, but rather that all knowledge – as commonly understood, including knowledge about determinism – becomes inconceivable.³⁹ If this is accurate, philosophy and science are epistemically worthless, for it is not the epistemic agent who conducts inquiry, but rather a process that leads them – a process that is the inevitable consequence of a causal chain initiated long ago. We are, then, epistemically hopeless. Rather than being epistemic agents, we resemble Plato's prisoners – or perhaps more precisely, puppets carried behind a low wall.⁴⁰

Before I proceed to discuss another consequence of determinism being true – or, more precisely, a consequence of (3b) – I need to pause and consider whether this situation can

- 36 And – it goes without saying – this paper is by no means an exception to that. Therefore, the claim that 'every determinist makes the claim that his account of the data is superior to his opponent's' (J.M. Boyle, G. Grisez and O. Tollefsen, *Determinism, freedom, and self-referential arguments*, p. 24) is a red herring. If determinism is true, then what I am saying here is simply what I am determined to say – and there is no way of knowing whether it is true.
- 37 See, for example, S.M. Knaster, *How the Self-Defeating Argument Against Determinism Defeats Itself*, p. 241: 'Some individuals might believe in the truth of determinism, and others might not.'
- 38 See Xenophanes, [fragments], [in:] K. Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, transl. by K. Freeman, Oxford 1948, fr. 34: 'And as for certain truth, no man has seen it [...] if he succeeds to the full in saying what is completely true, he himself is nevertheless unaware of it'. See also J.N. Jordan, *Determinism's Dilemma*, p. 54: 'one still might occasionally believe what is true, but this would always be the outcome of happy circumstances, never of reasoned investigation.'
- 39 Exceptionally sensible to this fact is J.N. Jordan, *Determinism's Dilemma*, p. 55–62: 'Therefore, if all events have sufficient causal conditions [...] there can be no justifiable argument for any thesis, including determinism [...] if such is the case [i.e. that we are 'programmed' – R.Z.], we are in the sad position of being unable to justify our confidence in any argument to that effect or to any other effect [...] If they make mistakes, they cannot recognize them; if they believe themselves mistaken in any instance, their belief is fortuitously correct if correct at all.'
- 40 See Plato, *Republic*, 514–515. If determinism is taken seriously, a question similar to Honderich's 'what we are to make of our lives if or since determinism is true' (*A Theory of Determinism*, p. 2) is either devoid of meaning or can only be answered with silence, for not only can we do nothing to change it, but we also cannot know that determinism is true. Alternatively, if we can know it, it implies that determinism is somehow gappy or patchy.

be circumvented at all. After all, it cannot be ruled out – or rather, I should not rule it out – that such a possibility exists. Perhaps there is a way, unknown to me, of knowing that determinism is true *if* indeed it is true.⁴¹ It may be that determinism is structured in such a way that it invalidates my argument, and I have simply failed to see it.⁴² For the time being, however, I must admit that I cannot see what that would be.⁴³ Instead, it seems to me that, for such a possibility to exist, there would need to be a vantage point outside the deterministic universe – something like that of the philosopher who releases the prisoner from Plato’s cave.⁴⁴ If, however, determinism governs everything and always, then any observer is necessarily part of the deterministic whole and, therefore, subject to it. The human mind, in that case, does not function based on what one selects as the goal of one’s thinking, but rather according to what one is determined to think – or, if you prefer, to what one is determined to select as the goal of one’s thinking. In this sense alone does one *know*: one is determined to know. Now, since we do not – and perhaps cannot – know whether determinism is true, we should explore another option. Fortunately, as I will now argue, there is still one available to us.

6. Another, more epistemically fecund option

To recap: the determinist asks the opponent of determinism for proof that they are not determined.⁴⁵ In contrast, the opponent may point out to the determinist that, if determinism is true, then arguments, reasoning, deliberation, and inquiry have no

41 See B. Berofsky, *Determinism and the Concept of a Person*, “The Journal of Philosophy” 1964, vol. 61, p. 464: ‘The fact that F itself does not provide a deterministic account does not imply that a deterministic account cannot be given.’

42 There may always be a solution I do not know or even cannot imagine. For a similar dilemma see N. Hartmann, *New Ways of Ontology*, transl. by R.C. Kuhn, Chicago 1953, p. 86: ‘we know no consciousness without organic carriers.’

43 Except for this: I venture to hypothesize that it is the human mind – shaped, perhaps, by evolution to meet organic needs – that is ultimately incompatible with grasping the very meaning of a world that transcends the organic level. In that case, I am unable to say anything more. See T. Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*, p. 523–524: ‘our access to reality is in a way limited [...] It seems we must accept the thought that our access to reality stands to another conceivable one as knowledge of lesser species stands to ours [...] I can have no grip on the possible reality beyond from which I am excluded.’

44 It would be interesting to know how such philosopher is possible at all in our world if we all are prisoner-like (see Plato, *Republic* 514a: *tên hemeteran phusin*). Notice that for Plato a release is a simple hypothesis for the sake of considering the process of his passing from darkness to brightness (see Plato, *Republic* 515c: *hoia tis an eiē, ei phusei toiade sumbainoi*).

45 Showing that one could have done otherwise than one did cannot be demonstrated. One cannot do this given one cannot remake exactly the same circumstances. Being confronted with the same choice twice or more is unfeasible. See W. James, *The Dilemma of Determinism*, p. 155: ‘but that only one, and that one either one, shall be chosen. Now, I ask you seriously to suppose that this ambiguity of my choice is real; and then to make the impossible hypothesis that the choice is made twice over, and each time falls on a different street [...] imagine that the powers governing the universe annihilate ten minutes of time with all that it contained.’ Consequently, if such a proof – or a test – is impossible, one should not ask for what is impossible and be charitable and recognize that the opponent of determinism is in a difficult situation. (This is not the same as to demonstrate that the determinist is right.) However, if the opponent of determinism claims that more than one future is possible, then they – rather than the determinist – should propose a test that is both possible to perform and capable of satisfying the determinist. Otherwise, the determinist may argue: if, after taking coffee, I offer a solid explanation for why I did so (rather than choosing another option), I cannot coherently claim that I could have done otherwise. For me to have done otherwise, different conditions would have had to be in place – but they were not. And if they had been, then a different outcome, i.e. a different future, would have occurred.

epistemic value – and no thesis whatsoever can be seriously put forward. If so, there appears to be a kind of standstill. Since we do not know whether determinism is true or false, and because we do not know whether its opposite is false or true, we remain in a state of epistemic aporia. However, if my argument above is sound, then it follows that if determinism is true, our epistemic situation is – and will assuredly remain – hopeless forever. But what if determinism is false? This is what remains to be considered.

Above (in Section 5), I presented our current state of affairs in three claims, the last of which was as follows:

(3a) If determinism is true, we cannot know that it is false (although one may be mistaken that it is false), but also (3b) if determinism is true, it cannot be known that it is true.

I will now turn to the final claim:

(4a) If determinism is false, we cannot know that it is true (though one may mistakenly believe that it is); but – and this is the crucial point – (4b) if determinism is false, and provided that there is no intrinsic impediment to knowing that it is false (and it seems there is none – at least not one similar to the impediment present if determinism is true), then it is better to opt for the view that determinism is false and to seek to demonstrate that it is. Therefore, in either case, it is more reasonable to adopt the view that determinism is false and to inquire further in order to establish its falsity.

If this is correct, then the second consequence – arguably even more paradoxical than the first – of determinism being true (that is, of determinism being true in combination with the first consequence, namely, our inability to know that it is true if it is) is that there may be a chance to escape our epistemic aporia. The paradox lies in the fact that opting for the thesis that determinism is false appears more promising than opting for the thesis that it is true.

Now, to avoid sliding too quickly from excessive pessimism to excessive optimism, the following should be kept in mind. Although opting for the view that determinism is false is a promising epistemic option, it is not a guaranteed one. I explain: it may succeed, but it does not necessarily have to. For this to be the case, three conditions must be met. First, it must be demonstrable that determinism is false. Although there appears to be no intrinsic impediment to knowing that determinism is false *if* it is false, this may be mistaken – or there may be an extrinsic impediment that prevents us from knowing it, in which case nothing can be done. Second, not only must it be possible to demonstrate that determinism is false, but we must also be capable of demonstrating it. Finally, to positively demonstrate that determinism is false, we must succeed in doing so. If these three conditions are met, then we are epistemically saved. Only then – that is only if we demonstrate that determinism is false – will we know not only that determinism is false, but also that knowledge is possible at all.⁴⁶ If, however, one or more of these conditions is not fulfilled, we remain in an epistemic vacuum.⁴⁷

46 Certainly, I do not mean to imply that the falsity of determinism guarantees knowledge or anything like it. However, I do not consider other potential obstacles to knowledge here, since determinism is the main topic of this paper.

47 Some authors don't see it this way and think that human knowledge is possible, notwithstanding *the laws of our world* being in force, and go so far as to laying knowledge ahead of a response to the question whether determinism is true or false. See, for example, C. Hofer, *Causal Determinism*: 'But in the face of more recent skepticism, how can it be proven that there are [laws of nature]? And if this hurdle can be overcome, don't

Meanwhile, since we do not know whether these conditions can or will be fulfilled, it is impossible to know whether opting for the thesis that determinism is false will prove successful. However, although there is no guarantee of success in following this path, it remains a better epistemic option than its alternative, which is doomed from the outset.⁴⁸ Opting for the thesis that determinism is true leads to an epistemic dead end, for either determinism is false or it is true – but if it is true, we cannot know it.

At this point, it is relevant, I believe, to note that the formulation under consideration may be expressed in a weak or a strong form. In its weaker version, it holds that *it is better to opt for the view that determinism is false*; in its stronger version, it asserts that *opting for the thesis that determinism is false is what ought to be done*. The stronger claim becomes justified if we modify the protasis ‘if we want to escape our epistemic aporia’ to ‘if we need to (or: must) escape our epistemic aporia.’ This modification is significant, especially when one reflects on the nature of philosophy itself. It appears as a kind of philosophical duty once epistemology is understood as an inherent part of philosophy.

7. Finally: Not too bad a prospect

After some introductory and preliminary remarks, in this paper I first addressed a well-known and previously discussed paradox arising from the assumption that determinism is true, followed by a second paradox that stems from the first. Throughout, I have emphasized a recurring confusion in the debate over determinism: the conflation of the ontic perspective with the epistemic one. To put it sharply: if determinism is true, the ontic structure of reality is such that our epistemic condition prevents us from knowing that very structure. In other words, if determinism is true, we are epistemically doomed; if it is false, there may still be hope. Since we do not know whether determinism is true or false, it is more reasonable to assume it is false, as doing so encourages us to engage more fully with that perspective. If it ultimately leads nowhere, nothing will have been lost.

I dare say, this is a particularly odd situation: we are unable to demonstrate that determinism is true *if it is true*, yet *perhaps* able to demonstrate that it is false *if it is false*. Interestingly, while the first paradox has epistemically disastrous consequences – condemning us to an epistemic aporia from which nothing further can be done – the second offers a more optimistic view: it provides us with hope and a practical direction. All in all, the moral is not entirely bleak: if the first paradox (which brings epistemically bad news) gives rise to the second (which opens a path forward), then there is still something we have gained.

Consider that, unlike Pascal’s wager, this recommendation applies not only to the undecided but also to both advocates and critics of determinism. If determinism is false, and one adopts the thesis that determinism is false, much may be gained – and nothing lost. For if the thesis turns out to be wrong, our epistemic condition remains unchanged – we are still the same epistemic marionettes we already seem to be, and little can be

we have to know, with certainty, precisely *what the laws of our world are*, in order to tackle the question of determinism’s truth or falsity?

48 For a similar approach see J.N. Jordan, *Determinism’s Dilemma*, p. 66: ‘Since to work to disprove it, no less than to support it, is hopeless unless it is false, the only responsible alternative is to deny it at the outset.’

done to escape the epistemic labyrinth we inhabit. Curiously, by accepting that it is more reasonable to adopt the view that determinism is false, we gain a stimulating practical corollary: we are prompted to devote ourselves to philosophical inquiry even more actively and to do so with enthusiasm. Until it is demonstrated that determinism is false – if indeed it is – we would do well to remain modest in our epistemic claims.⁴⁹

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49 Although I cannot fully develop this thought here, let me at least say the following: I do not believe that fatalism is a necessary consequence of determinism. No doubt, if determinism is true, it applies not only to the epistemic realm but also to the practical dimension of life. However, since we do not know whether determinism is true, why should we succumb to fatalism? Fatalism seems too easy, too premature, and poorly grounded – and in this sense, it is not modest. Even if determinism is true, we still do not know what we are determined to do or become. To embrace fatalism is to assume both that determinism is true and that one can foresee what one is determined to – an assumption that is far from justified. Fatalism would be warranted only if (1) determinism were true, and (2) one were able to foreknow the course of events (consider that determinism, by itself, does not imply the ability to predict what will happen). But at present, neither condition holds. Why, then, should fatalism serve as a justification for doing nothing – or for behaving badly? By that logic, one might as well stop eating, reasoning that if one is destined to die, one will die anyway, and if not, one won't. This is clearly absurd. The alternative proposed in this paper is more prudent, more neutral, and more intellectually stimulating than fatalism, which I regard as a kind of caricature of determinism. Rather than surrendering, it is more fitting for a philosopher to continue doing philosophy.

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Co jeżeli determinizm jest prawdziwy? Nie jedna, lecz dwie ciekawe konsekwencje

Autor niniejszego artykułu analizuje dwa skutki prawdziwości determinizmu. Po pierwsze, powraca – choć w zmienionej formie – do argumentu, że jeśli determinizm jest prawdziwy, to wiedza, rozumiana w tradycyjny sposób, staje się niemożliwa, i nie jest możliwe poznać prawdę o samym determinizmie. Następnie przedstawia drugi skutek wynikający z tej osobliwej sytuacji epistemicznej: mianowicie, że pozostaje nam do wyboru alternatywa przeciwna.