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# THE ABILITY TO DELIBERATE

## Elements of a Philosophy of Mind

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### Abstract

The paper argues that only in the sphere of deliberation does intentionality exist in the demanding sense of a kind of foresight and planning, memory and imagination that steps out into space and time. Furthermore, only in the sphere of deliberation can something like normativity exist, be it in a logical, moral or legal sense. For only those who can deliberate can have any reasons to believe what they believe and desire what they desire. Following these directions, a analysis of the determinations and indeterminations within the process of deliberation leads to a revised compatibilist understanding of human freedom.

*Key words:* deliberation, normativity, practical reasoning, theoretical reasoning, reasons.

### Resumen

El artículo sostiene que sólo en el campo de la deliberación existe la intencionalidad en el sentido de una clase de previsión y planeación, memoria e imaginación que sale al tiempo y el espacio. Además, sólo en la esfera de la deliberación puede existir algo como la normatividad, ya sea en un sentido lógico, moral o legal. Sólo aquellos que pueden deliberar tienen alguna razón para creer lo que creen y desear lo que desean. Siguiendo estas indicaciones, un análisis de las determinaciones e indeterminaciones del proceso de deliberación conduce a una comprensión revisada del compatibilismo de la libertad humana.

*Palabras clave:* deliberación, normatividad, razonamiento práctico, razonamiento teórico, razones.

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## I

The ability to deliberate is—along with the ability to view images, fashion tools and build communities—one of mankind’s most fundamental abilities. Yet it isn’t just one ability among others; it is one without which the others wouldn’t exist. For it is by virtue of this ability that we are *acting* creatures who can both theoretically and practically search out the possibilities to which we can commit ourselves in our comportment. This search concerns possibilities that are given or absent, that need to be created or recalled, hoped for or feared—and thus are to be heeded or ignored, seized or avoided. It is deliberation that discloses a world consisting of diverse states in relation to the past, the present and the future, and towards which we can take up any variety of stances. It opens up a sphere of attainable and unattainable possibilities for taking things and states of affairs to be true and making them come true—possibilities to which we confront ourselves in our perception, reflection and imagination. We come to a judgment concerning their existence, or to a decision as to how to deal with them. In the process of deliberation, we can fan out diverse opportunities for pausing, believing and achieving, opportunities in which humankind’s historical life unfolds. Without deliberation, there would be no historical-cultural world in which we could formulate and communicate our thoughts to others, or tell stories and hand them down to our descendants. There would be no world in which our actions succeed or fall short, in which empires rise and fall, and in which our hopes are dashed or fulfilled.

The ability to deliberate, which I will be discussing here,<sup>1</sup> is not an ability that is *either* theoretical or practical; rather it represents *both* a theoretical *and* a practical ability to sound out any and all kinds of states of affairs. Herder coined the lovely notion of “having sense”

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<sup>1</sup>This text is based upon my inaugural lecture at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt am Main on 27 April 2005.

[*Besonnenheit*] for this ability.<sup>2</sup> Beings that have sense in this sense *can* make up their minds. They can attempt to illuminate what something is and how it should be regarded theoretically or dealt with practically. Even someone who speaks and acts thoughtlessly and without reflecting—and who jumps to conclusions—can only do so because of his or her capacity to reflect. Herder's sense of having sense can be understood, therefore, as a basic endowment of a *rational* being. Part of this endowment is the capacity now and then—and sometimes more permanently—to behave *irrationally*. For the very concept of an ability implies that it will be exercised occasionally in a sub-standard way or will fail to be put to use at all. The ability to deliberate, therefore, in no way implies that those who are capable of it always and necessarily behave deliberately. It rather implies that they thereby possess a fragile power that does not make them immune to getting confused or being misled; for it in a way disposes them to do so. This insecurity and imponderability of the ability to deliberate even goes so far as to make us question whether someone who always would have *acted* deliberately, and in this sense would have *been* wholly deliberate, *could* actually deliberate at all.

However tricky the capacity to get our bearings in the process of deliberation might be, nevertheless it constitutes the root of what the philosophical tradition has dubbed “mind”. This isn't just the root of *this* or *that* use of reason, but of our entire understanding of ourselves and the world. In asking about the nature and essence of our deliberating, we can thus be indifferent to a certain extent towards the distinctions between theoretical, practical and whatever other kinds of reason. At least that's how Hegel saw the matter. As he wrote in an addition to §4 of his *Philosophy of Right*,

Mind is in principle thinking, and man is distinguished from the beast in virtue of thinking. But it must not be imagined that man is half thought and half will, and that he keeps thought in one pocket and will in another, for this would be a foolish idea. The distinction between thought and will

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<sup>2</sup>J. G. HERDER: *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1981.

is only that between the theoretical attitude and the practical. These, however, are surely not two faculties; the will is rather a special way of thinking, thinking translating itself into existence, thinking as the urge to give itself existence.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel thus maintains that human thinking can aim in different ways at different things—cognitively at how things are, practically at how things should be, receptively to the appearing of art, and reflectively at our own grasp on the concepts we employ. But all these are cases of thinking. Mind is at issue not only in the act of thinking, but also in the result of its thinking or intention. Mind is at issue not only in an intersubjective act addressed to others, nor merely in an individual's activity, but also in collective creations that go far beyond the activity of particular individuals, as is the case both with rules, rituals and institutions, as well as with economic, legal, political, religious and scientific systems. However independent these circumstances might be of particular acts of individual thought, they “are” mind in the sense that they depend on the practice of deliberation and understanding. For this reason, my reflections today are a contribution to a philosophy of mind—in the thoroughly old-fashioned meaning of the term according to which “mind” not only constitutes certain kinds of psychic states, but the entire sphere of human praxis. Both subjective and objective mind—to use Hegel's terms—have their roots in the ability to think.<sup>4</sup>

## II

What I will be doing in the following therefore will be some kind of root treatment, of which I hope it won't be all too painful for you.

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<sup>3</sup>G. W. F. HEGEL: *The Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox, Oxford: University Press 1952, p. 226.

<sup>4</sup>I deal with the limits of Hegel's project in my essay “Die Bestimmtheit der Sprache und der Welt. Für einen Holismus ohne Hegel” in R. Bubner (ed.): *Von der Logik zur Sprache*, Stuttgart 2006.

In order to carry off this operation, we first have to realize that deliberation is a kind of action—one that isn't, however, necessarily accompanied by external movements or interventions of the external world. We can ask a child sitting over his or her homework: "Are you thinking, or just gazing off?" We can ask a student in an oral exam who has gotten caught up in contradictory statements: "Take a second and think!" These kinds of requests quite clearly illustrate the active character of deliberation—thoughts are acts that one can undertake or not, and they lead to processes to which we can commit ourselves or from which we can refrain. On the other hand, we also say "Quit deliberating and *do* something!", whereby we draw a characteristic distinction between deliberating and other sorts of activity. This is why there is some truth to the polarity between "thinking and doing". One who merely deliberates doesn't undertake any *other* action. In situations calling for quick decisions and immediate action, this fact gives rise to the impression that those who keep on deliberating aren't doing *anything at all*. But this can only be said to be inactivity in a *comparative* sense, for by deliberating, these people really are busy with something that they could put aside now and take up again later. Thinking simply isn't making; it may not be *poiesis*, but it's definitely *praxis*—and not just *any* kind of praxis.

This praxis has an essentially intersubjective character. To be sure, it is only possible through subjective acts, since no one can think for another person. In a certain sense however, one indeed can think *for* someone else—as parents do when they consider when and where to send their child to school. However, no one can think another person's thoughts. Even when several people reflect together on what to think of Hegel or where they should spend their upcoming holidays, each person must do his or her own thinking and contribute his or her *own* thoughts. Only one who can deliberate alone can deliberate at all. Nevertheless, the ability to think implies that others are able to identify this ability. Apart from certain borderline cases—Is the kid still gazing off, or is he just thinking?—deliberating is an action that exists in a context of *other* actions accessible to other persons. It is manifested in characteristic modes of behavior, in mimicry and gestures, in speaking, writing and

other modes that can be interpreted as expressions of thoughtful action. Deliberation that wasn't capable of making itself known through actions or consequences, or of leaving any traces in the intersubjective world, wouldn't be deliberation at all. Whoever is able to deliberate inhabits a world in which thinking beings ascribe to *each other* the ability to deliberate.

This simultaneously intersubjective and objective contour of subjective deliberation has been illuminated so well in the works of Wittgenstein, Davidson, Habermas, Brandom and others, that it might suffice to leave it at these brief references. This reminder serves to underline the position held by deliberation in a philosophy of mind. Only in the sphere of deliberation does intentionality exist in the demanding sense of a kind of foresight and planning, memory and imagination that steps out into space and time. Only in the sphere of deliberation can something like normativity exist—and by that I mean *every* kind of normativity, from the logical to the moral and legal sense. For only those who can deliberate can have any *reasons* to believe what they believe and desire what they desire. Only those who can deliberate—for themselves and in front of others—can commit themselves to what they think and want in accordance with their reasons for acting. And only those who can do that can vary and revise their commitments. Only those who can deliberate can decide themselves to change themselves. Only those who can deliberate can be free in their actions.

### III

Now you might have the impression that this pretty picture of a unity between deliberation and freedom has taken on a noticeable amount of patina nowadays. After all, we live in a time in which the natural sciences are busy demystifying mind—especially in the field of neurobiology, which seeks to naturalize human consciousness to such a great extent that there is little that remains of the sovereignty of deliberation. For this reason, I'd like to take a brief glance at the current doubts as

to the strength and power of deliberation, before I make an attempt at restoring the above-described image with the help of some current techniques.

In the October 2004 edition of the journal *Gehirn und Geist* (*Brain and Mind*), eleven more or less famous German neuroscientists published a manifesto on the prospects of brain research. This article contains a rather optimistic assertion concerning the exploration of human experience and thought: “Even if we don’t yet know the exact details, we can assume that all of these processes basically can be described as physiochemical occurrences.”<sup>5</sup> One could take this as saying that the language of feeling, thinking and deciding—that is, the language of mind involving all of the phenomena to which it refers—will soon prove to be a mere epiphenomenon, behind which the true reality of neuronal processes will then become visible. This will be a reality that lies ahead of our own understanding of the world and of ourselves, determining us at the very moments in which we think ourselves free. Understood in this way, neurobiological research represents a serious threat to the self-interpretation of human mind. Where we believed to have a head, it is in fact the brain that reigns. This decapitation of the mind, however, would also imply the disembodiment of the very same sciences that perform this act of execution. For those natural sciences that reduce—or believe to reduce—thinking to its own natural basis are themselves outstanding creations of the same mind that they assert—or seem to assert—to be a mere chimera.

But this sentence can also be read differently—and in a way I believe to be far more precise and productive. Let me read the quote again: “Even if we don’t yet know the exact details, we can assume that all of these processes [of our mental life (M. S.)] can basically be described as physiochemical occurrences.” As soon as we direct our attention at the demonstrative “these”, we gain a much less paradoxical perspective on this sentence. For the assumption that “all of these” mental processes can be described as physiochemical occurrences presupposes that they

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<sup>5</sup>“Das Manifest. Elf führende Neurowissenschaftler über Gegenwart und Zukunft der Hirnforschung”, *Gehirn und Geist* 6 (2004), p. 33.



can also be described *otherwise*. If we weren't also able to describe the occurrences at issue in the "language of mind", which here above all signifies the language of *participation* in human life, then we wouldn't be capable of using scientific means to describe them in *other* and *further* ways. The language of thought and its reasons—including the idiom of the sciences themselves—is an unavoidable precondition for describing the neural processes in which experience and thought are realized. Whoever isn't capable of deliberating reasons can neither know the *causes* of these reasons nor the way in which they themselves have causal effects. Without an alliance with everyday understanding and its forms of reflection, natural-scientific research on the mind would lose the ground beneath its feet; for the object of their research does not consist in mere neural states, but in those states in which mind's self-experience takes place. Though it is certain that this experience is realized in neural processes, it is also certain that acts that are realized in this fashion are those of participants in human praxis. These are acts of *understanding* that must be capable of being identified *as such*, so that their neurophysiologic functioning can become a subject of being investigated at all. What is most important in the human sciences, therefore, is a rich description of this praxis—a description that makes clear that we are both natural *and* cultural beings. Or to put it more precisely: it is by virtue of our existence as natural beings that we are cultural beings, and vice versa.

If this is indeed a correct appraisal of the issue, then the friends of mind and freedom don't have any reason to panic. I do, by contrast, see an expression of panic in the attempts to find a gap, by hook or by crook, in the natural processes upon which thinking is based. This gap supposedly would make it possible for us, at least in the moment in which we form a genuine statement or a free decision, to step out of the dynamics of nature and determine the course of the world's events solely by ourselves. An exemplary gap-theorist is the American philosopher John Searle, who of course can look back on a whole gallery of illustrious predecessors. Searle takes the example of the judgment of Paris in order

to substantiate the existence of such a gap.<sup>6</sup> Paris stands before three goddesses: Aphrodite, Hera and Athena. And he considers which of the three—who all court his favor with various gifts—he should crown as the most beautiful. Searle argues that if Paris's judgment had been determined by his considerations, then his judgment would not have been free, because it would have been determined by his preferences, his knowledge and the resulting reasons. If his judgment is to be truly free, it must occur at a moment following his deliberation, in a gap between deliberation and decision. Searle holds that it is in this gap that the deciding subject is capable of taking a positive or negative stance towards its own reasons. This implies that we are only free when we are released from everything determining us before or after our decision.

Yet whoever is free from everything is no longer free for anything. Philosophers such as Daniel Dennett and Peter Bieri thus have raised convincing arguments against this gap theory.<sup>7</sup> This supposed freedom is located in a vacuum, in which an attempt at self-determination is neither motivated by anything, nor directed at anything, nor capable of effecting anything. The gap theorist's position—just like that of the reductive materialist—proves to be self-destructive. By removing the position a subject takes subsequent to its consideration from the causality upon which that position is based, the theory prevents this considered position from being an effective way of determining one's thought and action. Whoever removes herself from the realm of causality also removes herself from the effectiveness of reasons and thereby from the reality of freedom. Whoever exits nature simultaneously exits the domain of mind. We must therefore seek an answer that can make

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<sup>6</sup>John SEARLE: "Free Will as a Problem in Neurobiology", *Philosophy (The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy)*, 72/298 (October 2001).

<sup>7</sup>Peter BIERI: *Das Handwerk der Freiheit*, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag 2001; Daniel C. DENNETT: *Freedom Evolves*, New York: Viking Press 2003; see also M. PAUEN: *Illusion Freiheit? Mögliche und unmögliche Konsequenzen der Hirnforschung*, Frankfurt/M: S. Fischer Verlag 2004; BECKERMANN: "Biologie und Freiheit. Zeigen die neueren Ergebnisse der Neurobiologie, dass wir keinen freien Willen haben?", in H. Schmidinger/Clemens Sedmak (eds.), *Der Mensch—ein freies Wesen?* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2005, pp. 112-123.

the authority of thought comprehensible, without ignoring our scientific knowledge of human biology. We thus require an image of deliberation that is compatible with our knowledge of the neural basis of our thinking.

#### IV

Now that I have given these rather course indications, which perhaps raise a concern as to their suitability for a legitimate philosophy of mind, I'd like to turn to the process of deliberation itself. How does deliberation occur and how does it lead to results that are—at least temporarily—binding?

Deliberation occurs as an evaluation of reasons with the purpose of forming a justified opinion or intention. It serves the purpose of arriving at a *correct* theoretical or practical determination in a given context. “Correct” can of course mean very different things in different contexts—a correct opinion, a promising hypothesis, a plausible political appraisal, a clever sporting tactic, a worthwhile artistic effort, a morally obligatory way of acting, and so on. In all of these cases, the effort involved in reflecting upon something only pays off if it leads to convictions, intentions and attitudes that are correct to the best of one's knowledge—that is, only if it leads to insights to which one can adhere for the time being. That's exactly what it means to have a rationale for something: to have arrived at a tenable and binding position for one's comportment—or at least to have arrived at a position that is more *reliable* than one arrived at through indolence, bondage, accident or force. Deliberation always and necessarily has the purpose of optimizing one's orientation by justifying one's own views and intentions.

This occurs by way of an evaluation of reasons. But what are reasons? Simply put, reasons are states of affairs or assumptions that speak for or against a conviction or an intention, a particular stance or action. The fact that my voice threatens to fail me is a reason for me to take a drink of water. The fact that it is raining can be a reason to get out my

umbrella. The fact that Rome lies north of Naples justifies the assumption that Naples lies south of Rome. Oskar's feelings for Luise could be a reason for him to ask her out on a date. The fact that Mount Etna has erupted might be a reason to hop on a flight to Sicily. The fact that the price of oil is rising justifies the assumption that gas at the pump is going to get more expensive. Hegel's notion that propositional knowledge is only possible under conditions of social recognition is a reason why mental processes cannot be reduced to neural processes, etc., etc. Reasons are at hand almost everywhere. But *to find out* whether they truly count as reasons, *for what* they are reasons, and when in a particular context they are *sufficient* reasons—that is the task of deliberation. It takes up what is given to the person who deliberates as reasons—through the culture in which he or she lives, the education and experience he or she has had. It draws on information available to those who deliberate, as well as on investigations they are capable of making. Finally, it evaluates which reasons actually count as motivating an opinion or action.

As is clear from my arbitrary list of examples, reasons are not merely mental entities. Although thoughts are indeed often what provide reasons for thinking or acting in a certain way, external and internal states of affairs—geographic, economic or legal circumstances, thirst or infatuation, ambition or fear—constitute just as often the justification of a particular position. In no way is every reason generated in deliberation. Rather, the world itself is full of reasons for this and against that. Nevertheless, only from the *perspective* of a current or potential act of deliberation can states of affairs be grasped and conceived as reasons. Only by way of the *ability* to deliberate can the Sellarsian “space of reasons” be disclosed. Contrary to the rumors, however, this space is not a spiritual *separé* in the expanse of the universe; it isn't a vulgar Platonic or late Fregeian heaven of ideas. Rather, it is a worldly space in which diverse circumstances on diverse occasions become factors that speak for or against something. For the most part, this very earth-bound space of reasons has its center of gravity in a praxis of deliberation that is intersubjective, or at least open for intersubjective interventions. In this practice, we seek to draw correct and productive conclusions from what

we have previously held to be relevant and true—or from what after a renewing consideration seems to be right.

Logic is fundamental in this connection, but logic isn't everything. It is only in simple cases that deliberation occurs in the form of a deduction from established premises. But finding good reasons is in no way a matter for deductive operation alone. It is as dependent upon perception as it is upon imagination, for instance when we are concerned with determining which goals are worthwhile and how we can act. Whenever we are concerned with securing and filtering relevant information, our search for reasons is just as dependent upon a precise description as it is upon an appropriate appraisal. This search often ends in an evaluation of reasons aimed at marking out the best overall argument, the best overall course of action, the most advantageous overall way of living. Since a person that deliberates never has *everything*, and only rarely everything *relevant* in view, deliberation remains in the most demanding cases a creative act in which reasons are not only *found*, but also *formed* at the same time. It is for this reason that in the aphorism entitled "Gaps" in his work *Minima Moralia*, Adorno rejects an all too linear conception of the thinking process: "Cognizing involves on the contrary a network of prejudices, intuitions, innervations, self-corrections, assumptions and exaggerations, in short in dense, grounded experience, which is by no means transparent in all places."<sup>8</sup>

Although Adorno speaks here of philosophical knowledge that cannot be deduced from previous certainties, the result however can be generalized. In no way do we deliberate in wholly transparent contexts of perceptions, propositions and preferences with the goal of finding out what speaks for or against certain particular options—options, which often are to be determined in the very process of deliberation. This is why we speak of *forming* a judgment. It lies in the power of deliberation to form an at least preliminarily conclusive judgment concerning a theoretical or practical problem. Yet this judgment mustn't be formed arbitrarily. It must be consistent with the assumptions that both reinforce

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<sup>8</sup>T. W. ADORNO: *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, Verso: London 1984, no. 50.

it and that themselves stand in agreement with the rest of a deliberating person's praxis. Otherwise it cannot be a good reason. Otherwise, this judgment will not be capable of binding and motivating that person in the desired way.

In many senses, as deliberators we are *dependent*—on the amount of information at our disposal, on the languages we speak, on the preferences that guide us and on the state of the rest of the world. These very dependencies, however, are a condition for our *independence* from some of our former commitments that we can gain in the process of deliberation. By retaining certain commitments, we absolve ourselves of other commitments. Through the act of reflection, we can moderate and modify our living conditions by taking possibilities of thinking and acting into account that weren't as present to us before we thought about them, or which—as is sometimes the case—weren't present to us at all. All deliberation is a process in which we *open ourselves to the possibilities of thinking and acting*. This takes place as a weighing up among these possibilities, a process that, when deliberation comes to an end, results in a position that provides its subjects with a reason to believe or act in one way or another.

## V

But what does it mean to take such positions? How do they relate to what happens in the process of deliberation? If we think back to Searle's interpretation of the Judgment of Paris, we see how much depends upon an answer to this question. For it is at this point where the supposed gap arises between deliberation and commitment. This is consequently the point where it must be demonstrated that the notion of such a gap fails to appropriately characterize thought and decision.

One mustn't—as do Searle and others—conceive of deliberation and decision as acts of choice. Only if the result of deliberation needed to be subsequently reaffirmed, only if it needed to receive an additional yes or no, only if one needed to take a separate stance towards *what* one

has thought in order to make that thought have an effect—only then would deliberation end in an act of choice. If we continue to follow this conception, then we enter an edifice that in recent philosophy is known as the “Cartesian theater”. In this scenario, deliberation is understood as a kind of stage production presented to someone in the audience for judgment. The *deliberating* ego here appears at the same time as a *superior*, directing ego, which, after having seen all the reasons presented to it, gives either a mental thumbs-up or thumbs-down. This last decision is to be made *after* it has evaluated all possible reasons. The drama of reasons appears here as a prelude to an actual commitment, to the actual act of free judgment or free decision.

But this gives a highly misleading impression. Deliberation isn’t an internal observation of reasons, but a commitment that one makes in the course of *using* these reasons—in actualizing and mobilizing them, in discovering and evaluating them. In deliberation, there is no bare yes or no. Such an abstract yes or no instead characterizes the opposite of deliberation—a reaction that *doesn’t* take any reasons into account. Sound judgments and decisions are instead the result of *the reasons* that speak for or against this or that commitment. Since in the process of reflection these reasons are *themselves* positions that we take, we don’t need to take an additional position on them—and we mustn’t do so, if indeed they are to retain their weight as reasons. Reasons that have weight and consequence can only come about by being *thought* by those who have considered and developed them. Thinking is a targeted process that attains its goal in the *making* of a judgment. The act of making one’s own judgment is nothing but one’s own making of a judgment. The act of forming our own intentions is nothing but our own forming of an intention. The act by which we make these commitments *is* the taking of a position that occurs in the process of thinking—a commitment that, as long as its authors behave rationally, binds their future opinions and intentions.

So we must—and this might hurt a bit—abandon the myth of position-taking, namely that a rational subject could take a distanced stance towards its own considerations in order to formulate a position

on them. This distance doesn't exist in deliberation, for it is only by deliberating that we can distance ourselves from certain of our deliberations (if we don't want to forget, ignore or simply not take them into account). Deliberation doesn't leave any room for a special act by which we formulate a position on its results. There is no possible position we could take that would allow us to transcend our experiences and aspirations, our affects and affinities, our motives and reasons, the overall opaque network of our thinking. And there's no reason for lamentation here; for otherwise, deliberation couldn't be effective at all. It would be incapable of steering a deliberating person in one direction or the other. It wouldn't be capable of doing precisely what *only* deliberation can accomplish. Only thinking can investigate in a non-arbitrary manner among a multiplicity of possibilities that can be portrayed and evaluated in thought, and then choose those possibilities that appear best to the thinking person—and in the best cases to others as well.

## VI

Persons who can do that are, as far as they can do that, free. They can themselves determine what is correct in their thinking and acting. They can correct themselves and be corrected in their views of what is true and right. They have sense in Herder's sense, and thus can play with possibilities before choosing among them. They can commit themselves in their thinking and acting through the reasons they have. They possess the ability to give direction to their thinking and acting. They can be *determined* and yet at the same time they can *let* themselves be determined.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, what we call freedom is a specific ability—one that we make use of in the process of deliberation, and one that we demon-

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<sup>9</sup>This is the guiding theme in my book *Sich bestimmen lassen*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2002. Cf. M. SEEL, "Letting oneself be determined: a revised concept of self-determination", in: N. Kompridis (Hg.), *Philosophical Romanticism*, London-New York: pp. 81-96.



strate in a special way when we think successfully. Aristotle describes the concept of freedom to act in a similar way when he writes in the third book of the *Nichomachean Ethics* that a choice of will is “a thoughtful desiring for that which lies within our power.” In my own reflections, however, I haven’t been concerned merely with the freedom to act, but in general with the ability to deliberate—an ability that quite standardly is regarded as the source of what we understand as “free will”. Yet at this point, we must ask: What is the status of the process of deliberation itself? What favor does this ability to us, when it is merely an expression of the fact of our determination by other sources—be it by our social conventions or psychic factors beyond our control, or by the newest attacks on mind’s sovereignty emerging from the neural events which determine our every thought? This question is anything but harmless, for it points out that we can only develop a serious concept of freedom—and therefore of mind—if we are capable of characterizing deliberation *itself* persuasively as free. That is the moment where gap-theorists and other extreme indeterminists see their chance. After all, how can deliberation be a free act if it is realized in natural processes?<sup>10</sup> How then can freedom be understood as an event that occurs in harmony with what happens in the physiology, sociology and psychology of human thought processes? How could deliberation be free if it is incapable of stepping outside of the anonymous course of the natural and social world, as well as its own predispositions?

I don’t want to conclude without having given an answer to this objection. My response is that thinking, and therefore mind, needn’t step outside of anything at all in order to remain with its possibilities. It *can’t* abandon its natural, social and psychical determinants. Yet it can rely on *itself*—on *its own* determinability and determinateness, including the indeterminacies and intransparencies that are built into them, with which

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<sup>10</sup>Even if (or to the extent that) the brain is subject to indeterminist steering processes, the situation doesn’t look any better, for statistical laws are what would then govern the course of deliberation—namely something that doesn’t follow the logic of reasons, but a varied selection of contingent combinations.

it is capable of changing the course of things and therefore the way of the world.

However, it is true that thinking can also proceed in a compulsive and in this sense non-free manner. For instance, if we portray someone else's thoughts as being our own, or if we say something in a dispute just for the sake of having said it, we get accused of "jumping on the bandwagon." Just think of cases of dogmatism or manipulation, in which untouchable premises are brought into play that get exploited in one-sided, close-minded or just insane ways. Even in these cases people think, if not freely. Paradoxically here one could speak of "thoughtless" deliberation, which once again shows that "deliberation" is a normative concept. It indicates a capability which can be employed at sub-standard or standard level, and which can be activated or deactivated at the right or wrong time. It is a capability to which we attach the demand that it be used in a resourceful and succinct—yet not in a rigid or wholly unbridled—way. But how can we distinguish between the two? It would be helpful if we had a criterion that could—without glaring circularity—distinguish liberal from illiberal deliberation. But what could such a criterion look like, one which would distinguish "deliberate" from "thoughtless", compulsive from non-compulsive, automated from non-automated, ossified from lively, rigid from flexible deliberation?

My answer is the following. Processes of deliberation can be said to be non-compulsive, if they can earnestly envisage an alternative to the possibilities it takes up, without being *bound* to finding such an alternative. Free deliberation is not *fixated* on outbidding itself by evaluating ever more alternatives, for this would be just another form of pathology. But it *could* outbid itself, it *could* go in other directions. It is able to consider such possibilities not merely in a fantasizing manner, but through serious imagination.<sup>11</sup> It could do this in order to examine the accuracy of its deliberations—especially the *weight* of the reasons that have been decisive for it until now. It can vary its scope without losing it. It can commit itself, without being forced to commit itself to what

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<sup>11</sup>Drug addicts that wake up every morning and merely entertain the thought of quitting their addiction do not fulfill these conditions.

it has been committed so far. This process, in which we can commit ourselves deliberately in one way or another, is the foundation of human freedom. Freedom is founded upon the capacity to direct our thoughts and our actions in a way that is binding, but not without alternatives. It leads to commitments, which, had we thought about it otherwise, could have turned out differently.

By deliberating in this way, we find, create and have possibilities of acting that we can take up for certain reasons. This is precisely what freedom means: to perceive and take up possibilities—to recognize and seize upon them. Freedom of deliberation allows us to hypothetically vary and evaluate states of affairs in the world. Whoever is at all able to think is capable of *moving* in the space of what is possible and being *moved* by what is possible. As long as I deliberate, I *have* alternative possibilities of thinking and acting. In accordance with my reasons, I can convince myself of this or that, and decide for this or that. *After* I have deliberated and decided, I have *had* alternative possibilities. I could have deliberated otherwise or not deliberated at all. Even though, if we assume that the world and therefore the brain represent a closed causal system, *nothing* could have happened *differently* under precisely the same conditions, *what* could not have happened differently anyway?<sup>12</sup> Deliberation. But this activity is characterized precisely by the fact that, from the perspective of the person who deliberates, during its performance a spectrum of possibilities stands in a principally unpredictable relation to rational evaluation. Whoever deliberates *has* possibilities of reflecting and reacting that no other kind of being has—neither the apple that can fall from the tree nor the bat that can fly with such astounding dexterity. Whoever deliberates has the mental mobility of those living things that can adjust their bearings in thinking.

This internal perspective of a reflexive and communicative involvement in mental life is, as I attempted to say at the beginning of my talk, absolutely unavoidable. It is a precondition of human praxis and therefore of the natural and social sciences as well. We would be capable

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<sup>12</sup>However, it would be worthwhile arguing at this point, that the idea of “the same conditions” of deliberation is highly artificial.

of understanding neither *ourselves* nor *anything else* if we didn't understand ourselves as being capable of freedom. It is this freedom that philosophy and science are compelled to make use of in their various activities. This freedom represents the source of what Hegel termed subjective and objective spirit. This freedom is what allows the world to take shape as a cultural space of actual and potential reasons. But if to be capable of finding and having reasons means at the same time that we understand ourselves as being free, then a further consequence emerges: only those who understand themselves as free are capable of recognizing themselves as being constrained by their brain's neural processes. For only those who are free in and through their thinking in the manner described here are at all capable of *knowledge*. Any plausible philosophical determinism therefore implies an ambitious and demanding concept of freedom, just as a plausible notion of freedom implies an ambitious and demanding understanding of the way in which our mental processes are in sync with natural laws.

