

Bobier on Hope and Deliberation

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Abstract: In “Hope and Practical Deliberation,” Christopher Bobier argues that hope is necessary for practical deliberation. In this discussion note, I show that the crucial premises in his argument could be false; hence, his argument is unsound.

Keywords: Bobier, hope, practical deliberation, possibility

Christopher Bobier argues that hope is necessary for practical deliberation.¹ His argument proceeds as follows:

1. S hopes for x if: (a) S believes the attainment of x is possible or is at least uncertain about it; (b) S desires x; (c) x is future to S.
2. Suppose (for *reductio*): S does not hope for x.
3. Then: either not-(a), not-(b), or not-(c).
4. If not-(a), then S cannot practically deliberate about x.
5. If not-(b), then S cannot practically deliberate about x.
6. If not-(c), then S cannot deliberate about x.
7. If S does not hope for x, then S cannot deliberate about x.
8. S cannot deliberate about x.

¹ Christopher Bobier, “Hope and practical deliberation,” in *Analysis*, 77 (2017), 495-497.

I show, however, that premises 4, 5, and 6, which are meant to be necessary truths, could still be false.

Bobier motivates premise 4 by showing that “we cannot practically deliberate about what is thought to be impossible or necessary.”² If one is certain that $2 + 2 = 4$, then one cannot practically deliberate whether this is so. *Mutatis mutandis*, one cannot also practically deliberate whether round squares exist. This, however, is ambiguous as to whether we only practically deliberate on what we *believe* is possible or else on what is possible *per se*.

If we go for the latter interpretation, i.e., if we only practically deliberate on what is possible *per se*, then we could take any sort of possible proposition as the object of practical deliberation. This, however, is contentious. Surely, it is possible that there are flying pigs and 10-foot tall basketball players. It is likewise possible that I will eat steak tonight or I will go out and see a movie. Intuitively, however, only the latter sort of *possibilia* is within the realm of practical deliberation; the former is arguably not. It follows then that being *possibilia* does not automatically merit being an object of practical deliberation.

On the other hand, if we go for the former interpretation, i.e., if we only practically deliberate on what we *believe* is possible, then it seems to suggest that some degree of belief (or degree of uncertainty) is required for practical deliberation. If so, then it would mean that any degree of certainty lesser than 100% would be sufficient for practical deliberation. But this is problematic.

Suppose that I am only 99% certain that water is wet. Then the mere fact that I have a 1% degree of uncertainty whether this is so is already enough to practically deliberate whether water *is* indeed wet. This, however, seems odd. Surely, we don’t deliberate on that!

Bobier motivates premise 5 by showing that “we do not deliberate about things we do not desire or want since we would lack the requisite

² *Ibid.*, 495.

motivation to deliberate.”³ Thus, if one lacks the desire to do some action, then one lacks the motivation to deliberate whether to do it or not. As it stands, however, this seems to be a *non sequitur*

Suppose that you’re only a third party on a particular decision. Unlike the *real* decision-maker in this scenario, there is really nothing at stake for you whatever the outcome of this decision might be. In such a case, you could be motivated to practically deliberate on the given choices without genuinely desiring any of them. For example, an investment consultant might practically deliberate the best investment option for his client without desiring to invest in it himself.⁴

Finally, Bobier motivates premise 6 by showing that “we do not practically deliberate about the known past or the known present.”⁵ Thus, if some action is already in the past, it would simply be impractical to deliberate upon it. We could only deliberate on things yet to come, not on what has already gone. We may grant that Bobier’s condition (c) is true of practical deliberation, but not necessarily of hope. If backward causation is possible and agents could bring about the past, then we could have a case in which a person hopes to bring about some past event without really deliberating about it. Michael Dummett’s retrospective prayer example is illustrative here.⁶

Imagine a father, unaware of his daughter’s fate, prays to God to make it the case that his daughter has not drowned in a ship known to have gone down just a few hours previously.⁷ Surely, we would judge the father’s

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Of course, the consultant might have a higher order deliberation of whether to give his client the best investment option. But this again implies yet another higher order deliberation of whether to deliberate on whether to deliberate to give his client the best investment option, *ad nauseum*.

⁵ Bobier, “Hope and practical deliberation,” 495.

⁶ Michael Dummett, “Bringing about the Past”, in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 333–51.

⁷ The formulation of Dummett’s retrospective example is taken from Brian Garrett, *What is this Thing called Metaphysics?*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2011), 117.

act of praying as an act of *retrospective* hoping – it is a case where the father *hopes* to bring about some *past* event. This opposes Bobier’s condition (c), however. According to Bobier, since the object of the father’s prayer is already in the past, whether the father should pray or not is something that is no longer up for practical deliberation. Yet, we could still judge it as an act of hope.

Given the foregoing discussions, we now have reasons to resist Bobier’s main claim that hope is necessary for practical deliberation. Since premises 4, 5, and 6 could still be false, it follows that his argument is unsound.⁸

⁸ My thanks to Brian Garrett for his useful comments and suggestions.

REFERENCES

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