

DO FREE MINDS EXIST?

Commentary to “The Ability to Deliberate” by Martin Seel

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Abstract

The author explores some unexpected ramifications of Seel’s paper. Pereda considers what he believes may be reconstructed in Seel as an argument for the existence of free minds. He shapes this reconstruction in a somewhat extravagant way and strongly departing from Seel’s text, taking Moore’s external world argument as a model (I). Then he briefly considers the form of both arguments (II), to later take up again the concepts of deliberation and reason that Seel employs (III). Finally, Pereda returns to ask in what sense Moore’s and Seel’s arguments may be defended (IV) and what consequences this would have.

Key words: freedom, G. E. Moore, deliberation, M. Seel, body-mind problem.

Resumen

El autor explora algunas consecuencias inesperadas del artículo de Martin Seel. Para ello, reconstruye, a partir del texto de Seel, un argumento sobre la existencia de las mentes libres. La reconstrucción es en cierto sentido extravagante y fuertemente separada del texto de Seel, tomando como modelo el argumento sobre el mundo exterior de Moore (I). Después se considera brevemente ambos argumentos (II), para luego tomar de nuevo los conceptos de deliberación y razón usados por Seel (III). Por último, Pereda se pregunta en qué sentido pueden ser defendidos los argumentos de Seel y Moore (IV) y qué consecuencias tendría hacerlo.

Palabras clave: libertad, G. E. Moore, deliberación, M. Seel, problema mente cuerpo.

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More than introducing questions or criticisms, I want to proceed to explore some, perhaps, unexpected ramifications of Seel's paper. To this effect, I will above all consider what I believe may be reconstructed in Seel as an argument for the existence of free minds or, if we admit the expression, an "argument for the existence of an inner world" (as long as this expression is free of all Cartesian substantialism). I shape this reconstruction in a somewhat extravagant way and strongly departing from Seel's text, taking Moore's external world argument as a model (I). Then I briefly consider the form of both arguments (II), to later take up again the concepts of deliberation and reason that Seel employs (III). Towards the end I return to ask myself in what sense Moore's and Seel's arguments may be defended (IV) and what consequences this would have.

I

Quite often Moore's "proof" of the external world is formulated using the following argument or argument A:

Premise 1: Here is a hand.

Premise 2: If there is a hand here, then, there is an external world.

Conclusion: There is an external world.

Analogously, I propose to reconstruct Seel's argument as a "proof" of the "internal world", of the existence of free minds, using the following argument B:

Premise 1: Here is a deliberation.

Premise 2: Premise 1 presupposes that there is an agent with the ability to deliberate.

Premise 3: If there is an agent with the ability to deliberate, then there are free minds because only a free mind can deliberate or, if one prefers, "there is an internal world".

Conclusion: Therefore, there are free minds, “there is an internal world”.

Let’s keep aside the radical asymmetry between Premise 1 of argument A and premises 1 and 2 of argument B. It is true, of course, that to verify that “here is a deliberation” and that “this deliberation presupposes an agent with the ability to deliberate” is more complicated than verifying that “here is a hand”. However, the existence of the external world does not imply a complete knowledge of it nor is it true that, when we partially know it, we are free of confusion or mistakes. The same holds for deliberation or, more precisely, for the ability to deliberate. Steel observes:

The ability to deliberate, therefore, in no way implies that we always and necessarily behave deliberately. It is more accurate to say that we thereby possess a fragile power that does not make us immune to getting confused or being misled—in fact it seems we are particularly disposed to do so.

The expression “internal world” is somewhat forced for Seel’s argument. I employ it because it is useful when placed in contrast with the expression “external world” taken as a non-human world. For Seel does not see the word “mind” as equivalent only to “individual mind”—a particular kind of psychological states—but, with Hegel, also includes what is sometimes called the “extended mind” or, rather, culture or, if Hegel’s expressions are preferred, “objective mind” (or, in a more traditional translation, “objective spirit”). In fact, adopting a somewhat Hegelian perspective, Seel claims:

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, not 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.

Each “internal world” is, thus, an “expanding internal world” in the external world. This is why there is a constant overlap of that which is referred to—in this case with lucky imprecision—by the expressions “internal world” and “external world”. So, argument B may also be formulated thus:

Premise 1: Here is a deliberation; here is a painting by Picasso; here is a scientific theory; here is a religious rite.

Premise 2: Premise 1 presupposes that there is an agent with the ability to deliberate; the ability to paint; to construct scientific theories; to participate in religious rites.

Premise 3: If premises 1 and 2 are true, then there are free minds, because only free minds can deliberate; paint; construct scientific theories; participate in religious rites.

Conclusion: There are free minds.

What should we say about these strange arguments besides that they are a bit scandalous?

II

Let us briefly consider the form of arguments A and B. According to the presentation of these arguments, they both consist of a *Modus Ponens*: P1, P1-C, C. However, do these arguments prove anything? It may be objected that for a perceptual experience with the content expressed in premise 1 of argument A to serve as grounds for beliefs about material objects such as hands, certain other information is in turn needed to ground it. For example, it must be known that human animals interact causally with the external world and that these interactions are

adequately registered in sensory experiences. But if this is so, the truth of premise 1 of argument A must ultimately rely on its conclusion.

Something analogous may be said about argument B. If by deliberation we understand the capacity of an agent to decide upon action (a) or action not (b) according to the available reasons she weighs, the premise “there is deliberation” assumes the conclusion “there are free minds” since “only free minds can deliberate”.

But thus construed, arguments A and B, at least as “proofs”, would not only contain gross vicious circles, but extremely rude ones at that: (C), P1, P1-C, C. Furthermore, we must note that it only makes sense for a proponent P to introduce these strange arguments—which are perhaps more than *a bit* scandalous—as “proofs” if they are used in controversial contexts. For example, these arguments gain strength, and even sense, if, to begin with, we take as our opponent O a skeptical opponent of the respective conclusions.

Let us concentrate on Seel’s argument. Seel does not shy away from very popular current objections to the conclusion of argument B, “there are free minds”. In this regard, Seel begins by examining a relatively extreme version, attributable to a skeptical opponent to the existence of “free minds”: the reductive or eliminative versions of a naturalist program. Doubt is cast on the “language of mind involving all of the phenomena to which it refers”. Instead of that language and those phenomena—emotions, thoughts, decisions...—in reductive or eliminative versions it is assumed that these processes can be described as physicochemical events. In this way, for example, deliberation and decision seem to disappear as processes, there being no more reality to them than that of concealing neurobiological processes. For example, according to some versions of the naturalist program, when an agent thinks she is pondering the reasons in this way or that, or decides to this or that, in reality what is operating are causal processes beyond that agent’s understanding. These processes occur, so to speak, behind the human mind and, in a decisive sense, independently of it.

How can one respond to these skeptical objections regarding the existence of free minds? Seel’s argument is slippery. I propose recon-

structing it thus: mental processes may be described in physicochemical terms, but also in the language of mind. However, does Seel argue for an anomalous monism such as Davidson's (which despite its anomaly is a materialist monism, albeit not a reductionist one in principle, if such a view makes any sense)?

Seel claims that:

The language of thought and its reasons—including the idiom of the sciences themselves—is an unavoidable precondition for describing neural processes in which experience and thought are realized.

Thus, for Seel, our processes of self-understanding are at least epistemologically primary: they are the “unavoidable precondition” of any knowledge. What about ontologically?

For now, Seel justly denies the possibility of an ontological gap that would only grant freedom in the absence of the determinism or indeterminism of nature. (Among others, Searle has recently proposed such a gap which pays the price for freedom by eliminating all possible mental efficacy. But, what freedom would this be which, in principle, lacks any kind of efficacy?) However, Seel's appeal to Dennett's instrumentalism does not really work to support the *existence*, and not—as Dennett clearly does—the mere *operatively useful fiction of mental language*.

On the other hand, towards the end of his paper Seel oscillates between two ontological views: those which have been recently called compatibilist and incompatibilist views regarding the relations between freedom and a natural order or disorder, without it being very clear which of these views Seel finally endorses.

Against the ontological incompatibilist, Seel observes:

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.

But immediately, Seel points out against the ontological compatibilist:

Yet it can rely on itself —on its own determinability and determinateness, with which it is capable of changing the course of things and therefore the way of the world.

However, mustn't we decide between the adoption of a compatibilist or incompatibilist view? Or how else can we clean up this mess? To complicate things further, I pose the question: must we really take the skeptical challenge that denies that there are free minds seriously? Is it not along the same lines as the skeptical challenge that denies that there is an external world?

Thus far, I suspect that Seel, regarding the existence of free minds, wants to beat the skeptic in his own court. If that is the case, then he is as lost as one who wishes to beat the skeptic who doubts the existence of the external world in his own court. Nevertheless, is there another way to respond to these skeptical challenges? Before answering, I briefly consider Seel's description of the practice of deliberation.

III

In most of his paper Seel attempts a sort of description not only of what deliberation consists of, but of the interplay of reasons with which it is articulated. Let us briefly consider his characterization of deliberation and reason:

Deliberation occurs as an evaluation of reasons with the purpose of forming a justified opinion or intention.

Reasons are states of affairs or assumptions that speak for or against a conviction or an intention, a particular stance or action.

Regarding both characterizations, Seel makes a series of precisions, among others, the following:

- Not every reason is generated in deliberation. On the contrary, the world is full of reasons for or against something. Therefore, the reference of Sellars' expression "space of reasons" is not to a Platonic space, but to a very worldly one: a natural, social, and historical space "in which diverse circumstances on diverse occasions become factors that speak for or against something".
- However, reasons are not only found in deliberation from the outset, they are also formed in it. At each step in their deliberation, agents create, invent new reasons.
- Of course, frequently one does not deliberate in "transparent contexts of perspectives, knowledge and preferences", but in opaque, very often extremely complicated contexts, that the deliberator tries to clarify.
- Furthermore, a person who deliberates is dependent on the information in her natural and social contexts, and, with the latter, on her orientations.
- So, "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".

What can one learn from this description of deliberation and reasons regarding the argument for the existence of free minds?

IV

For now, we can try to approach argument A as containing several classes of implicit operators. Moore's argument could thus be rephrased as establishing not a proof, but a reminder. As a reminder, we may rephrase argument A as follows:

Premise 1.1: Remember (take into account, reflect upon. . .) that we all have spontaneous, passive, general confidence in the fact that, if under normal circumstances, we perceive that there is a hand here, then the best possible explanation of our holding that there is a hand, is that there is a hand here.

Premise 2.1: If, for instance, there is a hand here, then, there is an external world.

Conclusion: There is an external world.

We must be aware of how premise 1.1 does not work in argument A once it is rephrased as a reminder. Besides, we must take into account that skeptical doubts about the external world do not rest upon any lack of information. Therefore, premise 1.1, which aims at answering them, is not equivalent to premise

P 1.1.1 There is positive evidence (for example, vivid memories or inter-subjective corroborations) for the hypothesis that there is a hand here.

Premise 1, “here is a hand” is not offered, then, as a reason for a particular hypothesis, as premise 1.1.1 is. On the contrary, premise 1 does not intend to be more than the stating of a particular immediate confidence reinforced by the recollection that the first person must be confident that there is a hand if he can be confident about anything. This is why, if the following expression is allowed, it may be said that premise 1, more than trying to prove anything, attempts, as it reminds us of some of our most common actions, to induce an exploration of the reasons for and against certain argumentative practices: those which accept and suppress the inevitable reliance on certain immediate objects such as my hands and, indirectly, the general reliance on the world.

This is why argument A does not respond, or try to respond, to the skeptic. On the contrary, it invites the question: what would happen to us, to the practices of human animals, if the general, spontaneous

confidence in the world were suppressed? It is expected that the answer to this question will show that the skeptic does not hold, at least, the monopoly over reasons.

In order to defend the non-arbitrariness of this shift in the type of argumentative practice we recall the types of practical situations and theories in which we all constantly find ourselves. At least in those types of argumentative practices—which may be defended as the general dialectic situation or, if we prefer, as the natural dialectic situation of human animals—the presumption rules in favor of premise 1.

Let us yet turn to premise 2 of argument A. The conditional may be understood as going in two directions: “leading to affirm. . .” or “having an indication that” we take the whole for a part or a part for the whole. To choose between these directions, the participants in argumentative practices will ask themselves: what is more immediately acceptable without further complications, the whole, in this case, confidence in the existence of the external world, or the part, in this case, confidence in the existence of my hand? If regarding argument A we take the second option, the conditional established by premise 2 makes up a fragment of a process of reflection that tries to explore, for example, the commitments of certain beliefs: confidence without the least imaginable doubt that I have a hand (variation of premise 1) gives me a hint (an indication, a suggestion. . .) that there is an external world.

So argument A could also be reshaped as an exploratory argument in two steps. First step: “Since I am confident that here there is a hand (that external-internal object which is simultaneously an immediate part of myself and a part such as any other of the world outside me) there are at least as many reasons and arguments to trust that there is an external world as there are to trust that there is not.” Second step: “To break this argumentative tie, the authority of practice may be called upon. Supposing it is granted that there is a theoretic argumentative tie, the argument of practice speaks in favor of confidence in the external world”.

I believe reasoning analogous to that in argument A may be applied to argument B, the argument for the existence of free minds. This argument would be formulated as follows:

Premise 1.1: Remember (take into account, reflect...) that we all feel a general confidence that, if under normal circumstances we consider that deliberation is taking place here, that a Picasso painting is being perceived here, that there is a scientific theory here, that there is a religious rite here... , then the best possible explanation of that consideration is that effectively there is deliberation here, a Picasso painting, a scientific theory, a religious rite.

Premise 2.1: If some deliberation develops, if there is a Picasso painting, if there is a scientific theory... , then that presupposes that there are agents that deliberate, paint, do research within a scientific discipline.

Premise 3.1: If premises 1 and 2 are true, then there are free minds.

Conclusion: There are free minds.

Again, premise 1.1 is not offered as a reason for a particular hypothesis but as a reminder of facts that are considered amongst the most common to human life, some of which are even considered facts which specify what we consider human life to *be*. So, again, more than a reply to the skeptic, premise 1.1 urges us to ask ourselves: what would happen to us, to the practices of human animals, if the general confidence in the existence of deliberation, knowledge, including scientific theories, paintings, religious rites... were suppressed?

Something similar to what was said regarding premise 2 of argument A may be said in relation to premise 2 of argument B. Thus, the conditional established by premise 2 of argument B makes up a certain fragment of reflection that tries to explore the commitments of certain things we are confident about: the existence of deliberations, knowledge, including scientific knowledge, Picasso paintings, religious rites.

Because of this, argument B could also be reconstructed as an *exploratory argument* in two steps.

First step: “Since I trust that I really carry out deliberations, knowledge, participate in institutions such as universities and courts of law, contemplate paintings and I am interested in them, conduct religious rites...”, against the freedom skeptic, there are at least as many reasons to trust that there are free minds producing all these realities as there are to say that there are not”. Second step: “Even supposing that there is an argumentative tie between the skeptic and the defender of freedom, in order to break this theoretic tie the authority of practice may be called upon. This is, supposing that it is accepted that there is a theoretic argumentative tie, the argument of practice is an argument for freedom”.

Is this proposal acceptable not only in relation to the epistemological discussions regarding the existence of the external world and free minds, but also in relation to the ontological discussions regarding these matters? If it were, perhaps the controversies between ontological compatibilists and incompatibilists regarding freedom would be dissipated, and we would return to a modest attitude toward ontological discussions. That modest—and unsettling or even irritating?—attitude would consist of defending the fact that we must have as many ontological commitments as our epistemological commitments require, even when these, as in the case of the natural world and free minds, come into conflict with each other, or at least appear to.