

# DELIBERATION AND TWO CONCEPTS OF MIND: A RESPONSE TO MARTIN SEEL\*

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## Abstract

The author considers the concept of deliberation as developed by Professor Martin Seel, and he tries to extract from that concept an underlying picture of mind. The author describes two pictures of mind that are historically and philosophically opposed. The *first* makes a sharp distinction between subject and object, and it construes experience in essentially epistemological terms. The *second* avoids sharp distinctions between subject and object, or between mind and world, and it construes experience in essentially practical terms. The author argues that there is significant evidence of both pictures in Professor Seel's discussion of deliberation.

*Key Words:* mind, subjectivity, Deliberation, Kant, Wittgenstein.

## Resumen

El autor considera el concepto de deliberación, como el profesor Martin Seel lo desarrolla, e intenta extraer de ese concepto un modelo subyacente de la mente. Describe dos modelos de la mente que son históricamente y filosóficamente opuestos. El *primero* pone una distinción fuerte entre el sujeto y el objeto e interpreta experiencia en términos principalmente epistemológicos. El *segundo* evita una distinción fuerte entre el sujeto y el objeto, o entre la mente y el mundo, e interpreta la experiencia en términos principalmente prácticos. El autor aduce que hay prueba significativa de ambos modelos en la discusión sobre deliberación del profesor Seel.

*Palabras Clave:* mente, subjetividad, deliberación, Kant, Wittgenstein.

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\*The original title of my response was 'Language and Deliberation'. For the purposes of better reflecting the content of my remarks, I have changed the title for publication.

## I

I first want to thank Professor Seel for a very stimulating visit so far, and for an interesting discussion earlier today. I wish to thank Carlos Pereda as well for the opportunity to participate in today's roundtable on the nature of deliberation. The title of my brief paper is 'Language and Deliberation', although in thinking about Professor Seel's paper more carefully, I want to take the term 'language' in the broadest sense—a sense characteristic of the later Wittgenstein and others perhaps—in which the language of a person or a community involves a wide spectrum of both verbal and non-verbal practice. That is the expansive spirit, I think, of what Professor Seel means when he says that 'mind' involves "the entire sphere of human praxis".

## II

How we assess Professor Seel's proposal to foreground the notion of deliberation in our understanding of mind depends not only on what we are to mean by the term 'deliberation', but, more fundamentally, on what we are to mean by the term 'mind'. The concept of *deliberation* has its roots in the word *liberare*, or *librare*—'to weigh, to balance'. It shares its etymology with *Libra*, the scales of balance, and so by extension with the classical figures of judiciousness, Themis and Atalanta.

In everyday life, we similarly associate deliberation with processes of measurement, of calculation, of balancing different values, different reasons and outcomes. The idea of the human mind as a complex calculator emerges clearly in the early modern period. Hobbes, for example, defines human reason through an idiom of calculation: 'For Reason, in this sense, is nothing but Reckoning (that is, Adding and Subtracting) of the Consequences of generall names agreed upon...'<sup>1</sup>. By linking the notion of calculation to the very act of using words, Hobbes views deliberative thinking as penetrating virtually every aspect of our cognitive and social experience. Two hundred years later, Nietzsche characterizes

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas HOBBS: *Leviathan*, edited by Richard Tuck, Cambridge: University Press 1996[1651], Part I, Chp. 5.

man in similar terms. Man is the ‘measuring animal’—the animal defined by the habit of ‘comparing, measuring and calculating’<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, for Nietzsche, the role of measurement and calculation in the experience of the human being is so significant as to lead him to a conclusion similar to that reached by Hobbes, (perhaps) by Professor Seel, and by others. He says: ‘Setting prices, estimating values, devising equivalents, making exchanges—this has preoccupied the very earliest thinking of man to such an extent that it, in a certain sense, constitutes *thinking as such*’<sup>3</sup>. The modeling of new conceptions of mind and thought on the pattern of computing is still a more recent acknowledgement of something like a process of deliberation as central to the experience of the human being.

To see processes of deliberation—understood by Hobbes and by Nietzsche,<sup>4</sup> for example, as processes of measurement, comparison, balance, calculation—to see these processes as *definitive* of the mind is to have a very particular picture of what the human mind is, and of how it engages with the world. It is to see the external world, for example, as a field of action—as a reservoir of different and opposing options and outcomes—and to see the human subject as confronting that world strategically. What outcome will this option issue in? Is such an option aligned with my interests? Does it accord with my own image of who I am, or of what I am trying to achieve? What if I were to choose a different course? This is certainly, anyway, the form that many of our encounters with the world, and with other people, take. Part of the reason is institutional—much of human agency in the contemporary world is structured around the logic of market and contract, and built into that logic is an essential foundation of instrumental thinking. In other words, as a description of *Homo Economicus*, the deliberative account of mind is especially apt.

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<sup>2</sup>Friedrich NIETZSCHE: *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Douglas Smith, Oxford: University Press 1996[1887], Second Essay, Section 8.

<sup>3</sup>NIETZSCHE: *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, Section 8.

<sup>4</sup>In the context of the cited remarks, Nietzsche, in contrast to Hobbes, is not endorsing the identification of thinking with measurement and calculation. He is rather describing a picture especially dominant in Western experience.

Professor Seel's proposal, as I remarked above, is to see deliberation as the foundation of human experience. "The ability to deliberate", he begins his paper, "is—along with the ability to view images, fashion tools and develop communities—one of mankind's most fundamental abilities". Echoing the remarks above, we are asked to think of the concept of *deliberation* as virtually identical with the concept of *human thinking*, and by extension with the concept of the human mind, itself. But it strikes me that much of our experience is not so clearly deliberative, and the plurality of ways of activating the human mind might suggest a need to better circumscribe exactly the aspects of mind that deliberation is meant to constitute. What terrain are we trying to delineate when we use the word 'mind'?

Professor Seel cites Wittgenstein as an ally in insisting on the cooperation of both intersubjective and objective elements in the process of deliberation. But Wittgenstein is equally insistent on the non-deliberative forms of agency that characterize our lives. In a representative remark in *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes, for example, (discussing linguistic/mathematical processes such as continuing a series): "When someone whom I am afraid of orders me to continue the series, I act quickly, with perfect certainty, and the lack of reasons does not trouble me"<sup>5</sup>. Wittgenstein's example here is part of a larger category of action in which, in contrast to deliberative processes, we act "without reasons"<sup>6</sup>.

On reflection, it seems that much, perhaps most, of our experience meets this second, non-deliberative standard. When I leave my house in the morning, I may stop and deliberate over the various options for reaching the Institute. Most often, however, I simply begin walking, take my habitual turns, go this way and that way, and quickly find myself at the bus. Often, I am even thinking of other things, and largely blind to the path I am taking. Or another example, perhaps a common one for the itinerant academic: I have been away for several months and am re-using my local bank-card again for the first time. I've forgotten my

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<sup>5</sup>Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN: *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell 1997, §212.

<sup>6</sup>WITTGENSTEIN: *Philosophical Investigations*, §211.

password. I may reflect on my previous self—the self who set the password in the first place. I might deliberate on how that previous version of myself thought—would I have chosen my birthdate? My birthdate backwards? An old phone number maybe? More often, however, I step up to the machine and the numbers are simply, mysteriously there—as if in my fingertips themselves. I ride a bicycle in the same way, move about my apartment, sing the words of a favorite song, and so on.

My first question for Professor Seel, then, would be what proportion of our experience is more like these unreflective cases than like more traditional cases of deliberation? And if a significant part of our experience is habitual and non-deliberative, then in what sense does a theory of deliberation constitute a theory of mind? Is mind not equally at issue when we simply act—as it were “without reasons”?

### III

The above distinction between two types of action—what we might call deliberative and non-deliberative action—suggests two very different understandings of what a philosophy of mind should try to accomplish. In other words, it suggests two very different ideas about the kinds of phenomena that a philosophy of mind should take to be its particular subject matter. In trying to work out the dimensions of that subject matter, we might make a further distinction between two radically different philosophical approaches to human experience in modern philosophy (roughly the seventeenth century through today). It is important to distinguish these two pictures because there is evidence of both pictures in Professor Seel’s project, and I want to sketch the outlines of each before discussing some of that evidence.

There are two pictures of the human being—or we can say two conceptions of the human mind—that oppose each other on several fundamental points. As is well-known, the first conception—a picture of the human being as (1) a self-enclosed spectator whose orientation toward the world, from a philosophical perspective, is construed (2) in primarily epistemological terms—arises in the early modern period in the *Meditations*. It achieves perhaps its highest expression in Kant’s first critique, in

which the basic opposition between subject and object is seen as the axis along which human experience is to be properly understood. The implications for the philosophy of mind follow directly: What is the nature of the inner human mind and its *contents*, on the one hand, and what is their relation to the outer world, to the world that constitutes a space for action and for the acquisition of knowledge, on the other? As Professor Seel himself remarks, this first picture sees the human mind as the ‘Cartesian theater’, and depicts the ‘deliberating ego’ as a ‘superior, directing ego’ that stands over against a distinct external world, as well as against the procession of its own inner thoughts, images, and reasons for action.

The second picture arises in the twentieth century. It has separate origins in the work of Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and perhaps Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty as well, and its objection to the first picture is fundamental, rather than incremental or technical. The objection is to the very idea that human experience should be construed as an essentially subject-object relation, or, more specifically, that a philosophical account of that experience should be developed in essentially epistemological terms. Rather, for both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, the foundations of human experience are essentially practical. We relate to the world and to our particular social groups primarily through forms of action, and much of that experience—much of the way in which we are socialized into the everyday patterns of our lives—is habitual and unreflective, rather than calculating and deliberative.

How, then, should we understand the fact of deliberation in much of human life? In Professor Seel’s account, there is a priority claim between deliberation and the other elements of individual and social experience. He writes in the beginning of his paper that deliberation “isn’t just one ability among others; it constitutes the prerequisites for all of our other abilities. For it is by virtue of this ability that we are *acting* creatures. . .” This second picture of mind—insofar as it even retains a clear space for the concept of mind itself—would view the priority claim in directly opposing terms. It is our capacity to act—habitually, unreflectively, immediately, “without reasons”—that establishes the foundations

for more intellectualized activities such as deliberation and the balancing of reasons. Rather, it is the empirical history, in which our capacity for action is mobilized into distinctive social patterns and institutions, that produces the kind of animal—the human animal—that can separate itself in the relevant ways both from external space and from the “inner” space of its own reasons.

For Wittgenstein at least, there is an essential role for language in such a history. If it is right to think of the human being as the animal that constructs itself through acts of interpretation,<sup>7</sup> then the way to account for the apparent pervasiveness of deliberative activity in our particular social world is to look at the ways in which a particular vocabulary of subjectivity has developed in the Western experience, and to consider the institutional arrangements that continually reinforce that self-interpretation in our everyday practice. On this picture of mind, then, the kind of animal that deliberates—or more accurately that interprets itself through an idiom of deliberation and reasons—has built itself upon a foundation that is essentially practical. I should say that for Heidegger too, the story of deliberative man will be essentially historical rather than philosophical, and Heidegger, of course, is much more critical of the outcome of that history—the production of an organism that organizes its practical life according to a logic of technological domination—a logic directly traceable to the dominant picture of the human being as a subject standing in a deliberative, epistemological relation to objects and to the contents of its own mind.

#### IV

As I remarked above, I think we can find evidence of both pictures in Professor Seel’s outline of a philosophy of mind, and he might be able to shed more light on how those different pictures—conceived originally as antithetical philosophical projects—might be fit together.

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<sup>7</sup>I am referring here to Charles Taylor’s conception of man as the ‘self-interpreting animal’. See Charles TAYLOR: ‘Self-Interpreting Animals’ in *Philosophical Papers, 1: Language and Human Agency*. Cambridge: University Press, 1985, pp.45-76.

The first picture, as developed by Descartes, Kant and others, is a picture of the sovereign subject, free in his own inner sphere of mental (and moral) activity, and characterized by capacities for reflective introspection. This web of concepts—subjectivity, freedom, reflection—provides the cornerstones of a picture of self that is perhaps definitive of the modern Western experience. Each of these ideas is in some way present in Professor Seel's account, and many of the Professor's remarks would seem to reinforce the basic structure of the picture. Some examples:

On the pervasiveness of reflective deliberation: "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".

On the relation between deliberation and freedom: "Persons who can do that [i.e. evaluate possibilities through thought], as far as they can do that, are free".

On the autonomy of the deliberative mind: "[Mind] 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".

And on the more general idea of interiority: "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".

But there is equally strong evidence—perhaps even stronger evidence—to suggest that Professor Seel also wants us to acknowledge the limits inherent in the Cartesian/Kantian picture, evidence that may support the opposing picture—the picture that prioritizes practice over thought, the picture that seeks to overcome, or to undo, the Western bias toward epistemology, the picture that aims to replace the conventional distinction between inner and outer, and so that asks us to reconceive what concepts such as *reflection* and *freedom* could mean. Evidence of the second pictures appears in remarks such as the following:

On the inseparability of thought and practice: “The ability to deliberate, which I shall be discussing here, is not an ability that is *either* theoretical *or* practice; rather it represents *both* a theoretical *and* a practical ability to search out any and all kinds of states of affairs”.

On the (Wittgensteinian) merging of our cultural and natural histories: “Or to put it more precisely: it is by virtue of our existence as natural beings that we are cultural beings, and vice versa”.

On the rejection of the metaphysical: “...this space [of reasons] is not a spiritual room adjacent to the universe; it isn’t a vulgar Platonic or late Fregean heaven of ideas”.

On the importance of intersubjective practice: “...this very earth-bound space of reasons has its center of gravity in a praxis of deliberation that is intersubjective”.

Finally, on the rejection of the Cartesian theater: “Deliberation isn’t an internal observation of reasons, but a commitment that one makes in the course of using these reasons...”

And (cont.): “So we must...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”.

Finally, there are remarks in which it is not clear which of the two pictures is in play: “As is clear from my arbitrary list of examples, reasons are not *merely* mental entities”. It would seem that much turns here on the meaning of ‘merely’. Professor Seel seems to be telling us that reasons are mental entities—but they are also something else. If so, what else are they?

## V

I will stop my remarks here. As should be clear, I think that Professor Seel’s proposal leads to a number of very interesting and important questions about the way we conceive of, and interpret, ourselves—about the pictures that underlie not only our philosophical accounts, but our social arrangements, institutions, laws and cultural customs as well. As I have tried to show, Professor Seel’s project cuts across

the two major options we have established for thinking about mind, and about the human being more generally.

My questions for Professor Seel can then be summarized as follows:

1. How should we understand the concept of mind that underlies the notion of deliberation, particularly if we admit a range of practices and actions that do not seem to follow a deliberative model?
2. Which of these two candidate pictures of mind is most informative for the purposes of a model of deliberation?
3. How should we make sense of the fact that Professor Seel's proposal for an account of deliberation appears to contain elements of both pictures, despite the fact that they were developed to support opposing historical and philosophical projects?