

DELIBERATION, ACTION AND NORMATIVITY

Comments on Martin Seel's “The Ability to Deliberate”

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Abstract

In this paper I comment on several aspects of Martin Seel's paper “The Ability to Deliberate”, mainly on his claims that deliberation is a form of action, on his not very clear distinction between deliberation and thought, and on the relation between normativity and deliberation. There are also some comments on practical and theoretical reasoning, as well as on Seel's characterization of reasons.

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

Resumen

En este artículo hago comentarios a varios aspectos del artículo de Martín Seel, “The Ability to Deliberate”, principalmente en sus afirmaciones de que la deliberación es una forma de acción, en su no muy clara distinción entre deliberación y pensamiento, y en la relación entre normatividad y deliberación. Hay también algunos comentarios sobre el razonamiento práctico y el teórico, así como en su caracterización de lo que son las razones.

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

1. Deliberation, tells us professor Seel, constitutes a prerequisite for all of our other abilities; it is so because “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

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comportment". In this way, deliberation constitutes, as much as mental states such as beliefs, desires, perceptions, intentions, imagination and so on, a requirement for any intentional action; but deliberation is the ability to put all these intentional states into play and form plans that, eventually, may lead us to act.

Deliberation, tells us Seel, is actually a form of action, a kind of *praxis*. But probably it would be better to say that deliberation *may sometimes be a form of action, but not always*. It is not always an action, since, I guess, to deliberate is not something that we always do intentionally; it is not always something we do for reasons... or maybe better, it is not always something we do deliberately. Sometimes inadvertently, uninvited thoughts come into our minds and we just find ourselves, unintentionally, in the process of deliberating about some possible course of action. So, I think there is something not exactly accurate in the way professor Seel characterizes the *praxis* of deliberation. I guess that for it to count as an action, deliberation would have to be something we engaged in for some reasons, something we do intentionally.

At different moments in his paper, Seel characterizes deliberation in a very broad sense, probably as we would characterize thought in general. If this is right, then the intentional character of deliberation (and what makes it count as an action) seems to me to be more obscure, since it is clear that thinking is not something that we always do intentionally.

This not very clear distinction between deliberation and thought in general appears in passages like this one: "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." I wonder whether what we are really talking about is thinking, rather than the more specific form that is deliberation. And not only that: I wonder whether this is the case and not the other way around, that is, whether deliberation can exist only in intentional and normative contexts. It is only where we can give reasons that we can deliberate. Intentional mental states, often regulated by cer-

tain forms of normativity and that constitute reasons are the stuff we deliberate about.

Now, it is because deliberation is something that only occurs in the realm of reasons that a completely demystified approach to the mind—an account that takes a wholly causal perspective of the mind in terms of physiochemical occurrences—such as that of neurobiology, cannot account for deliberation. We do need the intentional talk, that of beliefs, desires, imagination, intentions and so on; not a demystified talk about neurotransmitters and physiochemical occurrences. All this intentional talk is a requirement for deliberation. One of Professor Seel's objectives in this paper, as its subtitle claims, is to point out certain elements of a philosophy of mind. This kind of talk, I guess, would have to be one of these elements.

2. There is a second point in Seel's paper that I want to highlight: the ability to deliberate, he tells us, is not only a practical ability, even though we usually talk about “practical deliberation”, not only a theoretical ability: “it represents *both* a theoretical *and* a practical ability to search out any and all kinds of states of affairs”. In this sense, deliberation itself can make us question the distinction between theoretical and practical reason. For centuries, philosophers have talked about these two kinds of reason as if they were two separate and distinct forms of reasoning. Roughly speaking, while practical rationality has to do with the kind of reasoning that leads to action or that determines what one should do, theoretical reasoning has to do with the discovery of how the world is, with the formation and the justification of our beliefs. The first one has to do with doing, the second, with thinking. This is the kind of image that Hegel criticizes when he claims that it should not be imagined that man is half thought and half will, and that he keeps thought in one pocket and will in another. This is just an analytical distinction that is useful for different purposes, but we should not take it as some kind of ontological distinction between two faculties, since the will is a special way of thinking. I think pragmatists such as Dewey—with all his criticism of dualisms in philosophy—would be much in agreement with Hegel and with Martin Seel on this point.

Deliberation is a form of thinking, in which, following this idea, there is not always a clear division between theoretical and practical reason. However, we tend to use the word “deliberation” mostly for practical purposes, that is, for the kind of reasoning that leads to intentional action. It’s weird that we hear that someone is deliberating about the truth of a certain theory; we deliberate mostly about possible courses of action.

3. Now, any theory of deliberation would have to tell us something about reasons. Reasons are the stuff of deliberation, since it is a process of reflection that tries to justify possible courses of action in terms of the better reasons. In this respect professor Seel tells us: “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, reason are states of affairs or assumptions that speak for or against a conviction or an intention, a particular stance or action.” In this way, the fact that it is raining is a reason to take out my umbrella; and the fact that there is some little movement of Tectonic plaques in the middle of the Earth that may eventually result in some earthquake in Mexico City would also give us a reason to move out of this city—even if we don’t know anything about this, I guess professor Seel would tell us, we have a reason. This, I guess, is a very realistic theory of reasons or maybe some other people would put it in terms of “external reasons”. However, in the context of a theory of deliberation, I don’t see very clearly the point of introducing reasons that are, so to speak, “mind-independent”. Reasons may be mind-independent in this way when we are told that we have reasons we know nothing about, or reasons we don’t acknowledge as our own and that may not lead to motivate any action. What’s the point of referring to these reasons in the context of a theory of deliberation? We can only deliberate about reasons we are aware of and acknowledge, reasons we internalize and see as reasons that apply to us and that may motivate us. In this way, in the context of deliberation, all reasons would have to be internal. They would have to be mental states such as beliefs, desires, intentions and so on, and not facts or states of affairs in the world if

these are not somehow connected with our motivations and with our beliefs. Anyhow, I would like to know more about professor Seel's take on this issue.

This is a paper that deals with a number of topics related to deliberation. I have just talked about a few of them, it was not my plan to comment on the whole paper, since I am sure that many other topics are going to come up in the discussion.