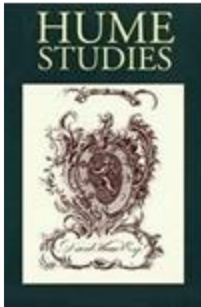

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Udo Thiel. *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*

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Book Reviews

Udo Thiel. *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 498, ISBN 978-0-19-954249-9, Hardback, $115.00.

This monograph is an important book for anyone interested in the topic of consciousness and personal identity in early modern thought. It offers a rich overview of the vast array of writers reflecting on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century conceptions of persons, their responsibilities, the issue of immortality, and the development of an account of consciousness based on the way in which minds relate to their own thoughts and feelings. It traces the lines of influence from the scholastic background to Descartes and through French, Scottish, and German debates on consciousness and personhood. The book thus represents an impressive attempt at offering a complete account of the different ideas that were passed around and developed in Britain and on the Continent during the early modern period, and a sequel to this monograph focused on the second half of the eighteenth century is forthcoming. In its breadth and aspiration to include a great range of less commonly read figures, this book serves as an invaluable resource for specialized scholars as well as for those who want to attain an overview of the major fault lines along which the early modern debate developed. However, Thiel does not always spell out the implications of the accounts presented. He therefore often invites the reader to think of the relevant chapters as starting points for delving deeper into the intricacies of a specific theory and the way it did or did

not engage with the thoughts of rival accounts at levels different from the ones discussed by Thiel.

Thiel's method consists in putting into dialogue less known figures of early modern philosophy, such as Hermann Andreas Pistorious, Jean-Bernard Mérian, and Friedrich Carl Casimir von Creuz, with canonical writers like Locke, Leibniz, Hume, and Kant, thereby illustrating very comprehensively how certain core ideas associated with the great thinkers were born long before they appeared in their well-read works. By and large the book revolves around two thematic strands. The first strand investigates the different concepts of consciousness employed by early modern writers, focusing on the question of whether or not a given author endorsed a first- or second-order theory. The second strand looks at accounts of personal identity that either endorse or reject the view that identity is constituted by a substance.

The introduction covers the medieval scholastic debate, offering an interesting account of how questions about identity were originally tied to concerns about individuality but later, around the middle of the seventeenth century, were superseded by theories that discussed identity through time. Thiel links the nominalist tradition with the idea that only individuals exist. A new focus on the experience of individuals and the way this experience informs the formation of concepts is then seen as having shifted the debate away from "a primary ontological to a more subjective treatment of the topic" (25).

For Thiel, Locke's account exemplifies this shift. It is, therefore, not surprising that his work constitutes the centerpiece of Thiel's book, while accounts published before and after the *Essay* are analyzed in relation to Locke's theory. By leading his readers through the many different responses to Locke, Thiel shows that the aspect of Locke's theory that his contemporaries found hardest to digest was the claim that substances (either material, immaterial, or a combination of both) are irrelevant to the constitution of personal identity. Especially interesting in this context is the response of defenders of Locke. For example, Samuel Bold and Richard Burthogge sympathized with many aspects of Locke's theory, yet both insisted that the continuity of the person requires the persistence of an ontological entity. A specifically Lockean account of personal identity here comes out as rejecting the substance view, while the claim that consciousness is constitutive of personal identity is taken to be the criterion that distinguishes Lockean from non-Lockean views.

At times the claim that for Locke all that matters is consciousness would have benefited from further discussion. For example, when comparing Locke and Thomas Becconsall, Thiel writes, "It would seem that Locke could agree with Becconsall's point about a rectified consciousness, for Locke too appeals to the 'Great Day, when every one shall receive according to his doings', when 'the secrets of all Hearts shall be laid open'" (174). However, if it is possible for God to correct

my consciousness by feeding actions into it before he proceeds to punish me—actions that will then be represented as having been committed by me—it looks like God's way of conceiving of my responsibility and assigning actions is not bound by what is *de facto* represented in my consciousness; otherwise he would not need to *correct* my consciousness and could instead directly proceed to punish me for those deeds that do actually figure in my consciousness in its uncorrected form.

In his discussion of Leibniz, Thiel makes a similar point about God's independence from consciousness in assigning actions (293); however, he does so without noting the similarity between Locke's and Leibniz's accounts. What this parallel treatment shows is that it is not always as obvious as Thiel suggests that for Locke all that matters is consciousness. Thiel turns to this objection in his discussion of Locke's concept of repentance (143), where he examines how it is possible for Locke to argue that repentance absolves us from punishment despite the fact that we can still remember our misdeeds. Thiel does not offer a solution to this problem (although he suggests that self-ascription might play a particular role here), nor does he take up the opportunity to clarify why it still makes sense to distinguish Lockean from non-Lockean accounts with respect to the question of whether consciousness is constitutive of personal identity.

In the two chapters dealing with Hume, Thiel offers fascinating insights into ties spanning from less known figures, such as Claude Buffier, to Hume. Buffier's *Traité des premières véritez* (1724), Thiel reveals, features a genuinely Humean definition of resemblance (393) as a relation we tend to confuse with identity. Furthermore, by presenting Butler as Hume's major target, Thiel suggests that there is a difference between attacking the substance view *per se* and attacking Butler's claim that the possibility of experiencing our own simplicity and identity through time proves the existence of the soul.

While Thiel demonstrates that Hume's bundle theory did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum, he nevertheless credits Hume with originality and identifies him as the first to have argued for a subjectless self. By contrast, Pierre Bayle, Henri de Boulainviller, and Léger-Marie Deschamps, whom scholars have sometimes identified as proponents of a proto-Humean bundle theory, are seen as remaining in one way or another committed to the view that a specific entity is the bearer of thought or, in the case of Bayle, as arguing that there is a multiplicity of subjects rather than none (414–17).

Clearly, Hume denied that we have access to a self that acts as the central unit to which all perceptions can be attributed, yet he acknowledged that we commonly believe that we are the subjects of our own thoughts. Thiel grants this point by drawing attention to Hume's recognition of our sense of self and self-identity within his psychology (425). However, here too, as in his discussion of Locke, he does not enter into some of the pressing questions. On Thiel's account, believing in ourselves as the subject of our own thoughts is no more than believing in a

fiction, which in turn seems to require him to grant that the bundle self is real in the sense that it is not a fiction. But Thiel explicitly denies that the bundle self is real, arguing that we have to understand Hume's bundle theory in epistemological terms, that is, as a theory about what is accessible to us in experience rather than as a denial of the existence of a substantial self. So one here wants to ask, what is the relation between the fiction of the self as a subject and the somewhat less fictitious and more real (but not fully real) bundle self?

Furthermore, if the Humean subject is a fiction, it is a very important one. The Humean subject of thought comes back onto the scene right after the short passages that describe the mind as a bundle, at precisely the point when Hume enters into his detailed examination of the mechanism through which the belief in our persistence through time is produced. And the self stays central to Hume's discussion in Books 2 and 3 in its role as the bearer of sentiments and passions. All of this calls for a clarification of the status of the Humean fiction of the self.

Despite my wish for more discussion of some of the contentious points within the theories of specific authors, Thiel's book offers a wealth of information on the interrelatedness of early modern theories of personal identity. It is particularly valuable for those with an interest in the historical context of these debates.

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