Locke and Hume on Persons and Personal Identity:
A Moral Difference

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Abstract: Locke argues both that ‘person’ is a forensic term and that personal identity consists in sameness of consciousness. I argue that the best way to reconcile these two claims is to interpret Locke as giving a moral account of personhood which he links to a psychological account of personal identity. According to my interpretation, a Lockean person is a subject of accountability and Locke’s particular understanding of the conditions of just accountability explains why he offers a psychological account of personal identity. However, if my interpretation is correct, then the question is pressing why hardly any eighteenth-century thinker adopts Locke’s distinction between persons, human organisms and immaterial substances, let alone acknowledges Locke’s claim that ‘person’ is a forensic term. The aim of this paper is to provide an explanation why Locke was widely interpreted differently in the eighteenth century. I address this question by focusing on the differences between Locke’s and Hume’s account of persons and personal identity. An interesting result of these considerations will be that Hume’s discussion of the self in Books 2 and 3 of his Treatise leaves less scope for distinguishing persons from human organisms than his discussion in Book 1. This is remarkable in so far that it shows that once Hume turns to moral philosophy he can no longer accommodate Locke’s distinction which was originally introduced on moral grounds. I propose that the difference between Locke’s and Hume’s accounts can be understood on the basis of their different underlying moral theories.
1 Locke on Persons and Personal Identity

The aim of this paper is to understand why not many eighteenth-century thinkers follow Locke in distinguishing the term ‘person’ from ‘man’. However, before I can address this question let me outline my interpretation of Locke’s account of persons and personal identity.

When Locke turns to the discussion of persons and personal identity in II.xxvii.9 of his An Essay concerning Human Understanding he follows the procedure that he established in the previous sections. On this basis, he claims that we have to specify the meaning of the term ‘person’ before we can turn to questions concerning personal identity over time. Locke offers the following two characterizations of a person:

*Person* stands for [...] a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places (Essay II.xxvii.9)

*Person* [...] is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery. (Essay II.xxvii.26)

I believe that Locke’s account of personhood is fully articulated in the latter passage which makes it plausible to regard Lockean persons as moral beings, and, more precisely, subjects of accountability.

Having introduced Locke’s account of personhood, the question of personal identity over time, is now the question to specify the conditions under which a subject of accountability continues to exist over time. Locke’s thinking about just accountability, in particular in cases concerning drunkenness, sleep and illness, helps to explain why Locke argues that personal identity

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1 All references to Locke’s An Essay concerning Human Understanding, here referred to by Essay, will be made to Peter H. Nidditch’s Clarendon edition, which is based on the fourth edition of the Essay, and will appear by book number.chapter number.section number.

2 It is easy to show that every being that satisfies Locke’s characterization of a person in II.xxvii.26 also satisfies the characterization in II.xxvii.9. The reverse is less obvious, but can be established with reference to Locke’s chapter ‘Of Power’ (Essay II.xxi) and his essay ‘Of Ethic in General’, in Locke, Political Essays (Mark Goldie, Ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. For further discussion see also Jessica Spector, ‘The Grounds of Moral Agency: Locke’s Account of Personal Identity’. In Journal of Moral Philosophy 5 (2008), 256-281.
consists in sameness of consciousness. According to Locke, it is unjust to hold someone accountable now for an action which was done without consciousness and which one is unable to be conscious of now.

As a result it can be said that Locke’s account of personal identity is not psychological per se, but rather Locke chooses to account for personal identity in terms of sameness of consciousness because of his moral account of personhood and because of his particular thinking about the conditions of just accountability.

2 The Reception of Locke

Given my interpretation of Locke, I have to acknowledge that my reading of Locke’s account of persons and personal identity, according to which persons are moral subjects of accountability, was not common in the eighteenth century. Yet one exception is worth noting: Edmund Law emphasizes in his A Defence of Mr. Locke’s Opinion concerning Personal Identity that ‘person’, according to Locke, is a forensic term. However, besides Law’s interpretation, Locke was widely understood differently than I propose and pressure is on my side to explain the difference. To address this issue, I find it helpful to reflect on the question why eighteenth-century thinkers do not adopt Locke’s distinction between the terms ‘person’ and ‘man’, let alone acknowledge Locke’s claim that ‘person’ is a forensic term. I believe that we can gain helpful insight to these issues by turning to Hume’s philosophy as I do now.

3 Hume on Persons and Personal Identity

According to Hume, personal identity ‘has become so great a question in philosophy, especially of late years in England’ (Treatise 1.4.6.15, 259). There is

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no doubt that Hume’s discussion of personal identity is influenced by Locke, among others, but it also meant to provide a new response to the issues discussed. Hume does not adopt Locke’s distinction between the terms ‘person’ and ‘man’. This fact is worth explaining and in the following I will ask, firstly, whether his philosophy has scope for drawing such a distinction and, secondly, why he does not adopt the distinction. I will now turn to his discussion of persons and personal identity in Book 1 and in Books 2 and 3 of his Treatise in light of these questions.5

3.1 Treatise, Book 1

Hume begins his discussion by examining the self as he finds it in introspection and claims that all he finds is a bundle of perceptions (see Treatise 1.4.6.1-4, 251-253). Our perceptions constantly change, yet Hume acknowledges that we form a belief in our personal identity and aims to explain why we form this belief. The resources Hume has to explain our belief in personal identity are the three associative principles, namely, resemblance, spatiotemporal contiguity and causation (see Treatise 1.4.6.6-20, 253-262). He quickly puts contiguity aside and argues that our belief in personal identity is to be explained solely on the basis of resemblance and causation (see Treatise 1.4.6.17-20, 260-262).

This move is interesting in so far as it leaves room for explaining our belief in the identity of a human organism in addition to the belief in personal identity. Hume does not say why he puts contiguity aside with regard to personal identity, yet the best explanation for this is that Hume believes that many perceptions are not spatially located (see Treatise 1.4.5.9-10, 235-236).6 In contrast to this, an explanation for our belief in the identity of a human organism will appeal to spatiotemporal contiguity. This shows that Book 1 has the scope for acknowledging a distinction between persons and human organisms.

However, it is worth drawing attention to a difference between Hume’s approach to the self in Book 1 and Locke’s. Hume approaches the self via introspection, whilst Locke – at least, given my interpretation – begins by

5 The relation between Book 1 and Books 2 and 3 of Hume’s Treatise is controversial and for this reason I consider them separately. Passages in 1.4.6.5, 19 and 2.1.2.2, 253, 261 and 277, make plausible that Hume believes that his account of the self in Book 2 continues the account in Book 1.

offering an abstract definition of a person as a moral being. While Hume has the resources to distinguish persons and human organisms, we cannot assume that the selves or persons he considers are moral beings or subjects of accountability in the sense in which Locke uses the term ‘person’.

### 3.2 Treatise, Books 2 and 3

Hume returns to the self in Book 2 in the context of his discussion of the indirect passions pride and humility. According to Hume, pride and humility are directed towards the self, or, as he puts it, have self as their object (see Treatise 2.1.2.2, 277). Throughout the discussion of Books 2 and 3 selves are embodied and social creatures.\(^7\) This is a significant move away from Book 1 where Hume does not invoke any bodily features when he offers his explanation of our belief in personal identity. What gives him now the confidence to regard persons as embodied creatures?

One way we can shed light on Hume’s move is by examining the role which other people play in his philosophy in Books 2 and 3. Hume observes that pride and humility themselves would not be stable, were they ‘not seconded by the opinions and sentiments of others.’ (Treatise 2.1.11.1, 316) This means, for example, that the pride which I take in my own person, say, because I own a beautiful garden, would not last unless other people reverberate my feelings and praise me for owning the garden. Since for Hume, the love of others is directed towards my self in the same way as my own pride is directed towards my self, a self has to be accessible both from a first personal perspective and from the perspective of others. If a self were merely a bundle of perceptions which is given in introspection, then it would be difficult for others to have access to my self, and to praise and blame me. Yet if we assume that the self is embodied then a self will be accessible both from a first personal perspective and from the perspective of others.

### 4 Explaining the Difference

The previous consideration bring to light the interesting result that Hume has less scope for adopting Locke’s distinction between the terms ‘person’ and ‘man’ in Books 2 and 3 of his Treatise than in Book 1. This result makes even more pressing the need for an explanation why Locke’s distinction

\(^7\)For further discussion see Annette Baier, A Progress of Sentiments, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, ch. 6.
was hardly adopted by eighteenth-century thinkers, because it suggests that Hume’s moral views cannot accommodate a distinction which was originally introduced on moral grounds.

At this stage it is helpful to reflect on the underlying moral differences of Locke’s and Hume’s theories. Hume’s philosophy, including his moral philosophy, is based upon human nature (see Treatise, Introduction). Given that the foundation of his moral theory is to be found in human nature, we receive additional support why human beings as a whole are in the centre of his moral thinking and why a distinction between persons and human organisms is hard to incorporate into a philosophy based upon human nature.\footnote{For further discussion see Paul Russell, Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume’s Way of Naturalizing Responsibility, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, ch. 10.}

Furthermore, while Locke’s notion of accountability was closely tied to reward and punishment in the context of a divine Last Judgement, Hume’s philosophy replaces divine reward and punishment by social blame and praise. Since selves in Hume’s moral philosophy are social creatures a self has to be accessible not only from a first personal internal perspective, but also from the perspective of other people. Given the importance which society plays in Hume’s theory, adopting Locke’s account of persons and personal identity would render the theory impracticable in social contexts.

5 Conclusion

I want to conclude by highlighting the values of my paper. First of all, this paper provides support for an interpretation of Locke which takes seriously Locke’s claim that ‘person’ is a forensic term. However, I also acknowledge the need to explain why my interpretation of Locke was not widely adopted in the eighteenth century. I have offered such an explanation with respect to Hume’s reception of Locke and argued that the different underlying moral theory explains why he does not adopts Locke’s distinction between persons and human organisms: Drawing attention to the different moral theories and the important role which society starts to play in eighteenth-century philosophy is a promising way to explain why many eighteenth-century thinkers only had a partial understanding of Lockes view. At the same time this result shows that Locke’s views are bound to very specific underlying moral and religious assumptions and gives a reason to be cautious to apply his views outside their moral and religious context.