

Locke on Education, Persons, and Moral Agency

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Abstract

In her book *Experience Embodied* Anik Waldow devotes a chapter to “Locke’s Experimental Persons.” Her chapter aims to show how Locke’s views on persons, personal identity, and moral agency in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* build on his esteem-based approach to education that he develops in *Some Thoughts concerning Education*. After outlining main contributions that Waldow makes in her chapter, I turn to three issues that in my view deserve further consideration. First, I draw attention to the question of how Locke’s esteem-based education can be reconciled with his moral views in the *Essay*. I propose that the question of how children become persons or moral agents who see their actions bound by divine law is worth examining with more detail. Second, I contrast Waldow’s interpretation of what a Lockean action is with an alternative interpretation and show that this has implications for how we understand the role of consciousness in Locke’s account of persons and personal identity. Third, I take a closer look at Waldow’s view that consciousness has an epistemic function in Locke’s account of persons and personal identity and highlight advantages of also acknowledging a metaphysical function of consciousness.

Keywords: John Locke, education, moral agency, persons, personal identity, consciousness

The second chapter of Anik Waldow's book *Experience Embodied* focuses on "Locke's Experiential Persons". This chapter brings together Locke's account of education, which he develops in *Some Thoughts concerning Education*¹, with his views on persons, personal identity and moral agency in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*² and other works. Waldow's chapter makes important contributions to Locke scholarship, since the question of how Locke's account of education provides a basis for his account of persons and personal identity has not yet received sufficient attention.

1. Main contributions of the chapter

Let me start by briefly summarizing the core arguments of the chapter. Waldow's chapter is rich and insightful and in the following I will not have the space to reconstruct all her arguments, but rather will focus on some of the core themes of the chapter.

In section 2.1 Waldow carefully examines what role reward and punishment play in the education of children. Locke, as Waldow makes clear, opposes the use of corporeal punishment in the upbringing of children. For instance, he writes that

Beating then, and all other Sorts of slavish and corporal Punishments, are not the Discipline fit to be used in the Education of those we would have wise, good, and ingenuous Men; and therefore very rarely to be applied, and that only in great Occasions, and Cases of Extremity. (*Some Thoughts*, §52, 113)

Locke is critical about the use of corporeal punishment because it would instil the wrong type of motivation in children if it was used. Children would act out of fear of bodily pain and this, Locke believes, would hinder their proper moral development. Waldow draws a distinction between two classes of rewards and punishments. On the one hand, there are "those primarily working through the body" (Waldow 2020, 60). Rewards of this type include sweets such as "*Apples, or Sugar-plumbs*" (*Some Thoughts*, §52, 114) or other treats given to children that increase their bodily pleasures, while punishments of this type include corporeal punishment and lead to bodily pain. Waldow notes that in order for rewards and punishments of this first class "to succeed, a rather simple

¹ Hereafter references to Locke (1989 [1693]) will be abbreviated as "*Some Thoughts*" in the text and cited by paragraph number, followed by page number.

² Hereafter references to Locke (1975 [1690]) will be abbreviated as "*Essay*" in the text and cited by book, chapter, section number. Where relevant the edition number will be added in bold.

motivational structure seems to be sufficient; one that requires little more than a rudimentary form of episodic memory triggered in the face of similar situations and the capacity to act on affective drives and desires” (2020, 60). On the other hand, rewards and punishments of the second class cause “pleasure and pain by feeding certain experiences and ideas into the conception of ourselves as agents” (Waldow 2020, 60). Rewards and punishments of this second class operate through “a more complex motivational structure” (Waldow 2020, 60), namely the anticipation of esteem and disgrace. Waldow acknowledges that esteem is a kind of pleasure and disgrace a kind of pain, but her point is that “in order to feel this kind of pleasure [or pain] it is necessary to shift our focus from the objects that elicit pleasure [or pain] to ourselves and the way we are seen by others” (2020, 60). This shift, so Waldow argues, makes it possible for us to “become conscious of ourselves as someone with evaluable moral qualities” (2020, 60). According to Waldow, Locke’s esteem-based education plays a particularly important role in the moral development of children, because it makes it possible to shift attention towards the development of mental capacities that enable us to see ourselves as persons or moral agents.

In section 2.2 Waldow draws attention to the difference between habit training and conditioning and aims to “demonstrate that Locke’s educational work cannot be understood as a manual for the conditioning of children” (2020, 57). The reason for this, Waldow argues, is that “habit training turns out to be far too complex to be subsumable under the simple stimulus-response patterns typical of behavioral conditioning” (2020, 74). Locke’s educational approach aims to turn children into rational moral agents who can use their reason and reflection well, but he is also aware that reason develops gradually. This leads Locke to argue, so Waldow notes, that “children ought to follow their parents’ guidance only for as long as they are not in possession of reason” (2020, 63). As children grow up and learn through experiences of esteem and disgrace, they develop “a number of complex cognitive processes” (Waldow 2020, 73), which enable them to see themselves as persons. The cognitive capacities that children develop during this learning process involve, for example, the ability to understand gestures, facial and verbal expressions of others and to interpret their responses to one’s own actions. Moreover, to see oneself “as an agent who is subject to moral evaluation” (Waldow 2020, 73) requires the capacities to abstract and “to reflect on one’s own doings and the experiences of esteem and disgrace caused by one’s social interactions with others” (Waldow 2020, 73). Since Locke’s educational approach involves such complex and sophisticated cognitive capacities, Waldow argues that habit training plays a significant role in it.

In section 2.3 Waldow applies Locke’s views on education to his views on personhood in the *Essay*. Waldow is in agreement with several other interpreters that Lockean persons are rational

and moral agents, but she aims to add to existing interpretations “that it is precisely *because* moral agency matters so much to Locke’s account of personhood that we need to acknowledge that reason and reflection play a crucial role in *how* we become conscious of ourselves” (2020, 77). Waldow emphasizes the “epistemic aspect of being conscious of oneself” (2020, 77), which for her concerns a person’s ability to *understand* oneself as a moral being who is responsible for one’s actions.

In section 2.4 Waldow turns to a potential problem that Locke acknowledges, namely the possibility “that there may be mistakes in how we self-attribute actions and settle our responsibilities: we can either attribute too much, or too little to ourselves” (2020, 82). According to Waldow, Locke’s solution to such potential mistakes is that God can play an active role as divine judge and correct a person’s mistaken self-conception, for instance, by reviving forgotten past experiences or by correcting false representations of past experiences. Waldow highlights once more that consciousness, for Locke, has an epistemic function. She claims that consciousness “not only gives us knowledge of our responsibilities as moral agents but also puts a stop to suspicions revolving around the idea that the miseries that have befallen us in our lives on earth constitute some kind of divine punishment for something we are not aware of as having done” (Waldow 2020, 86).

Having outlined some of Waldow’s core contributions, I now turn to my own critical observations and want to raise a few issues that deserve further consideration.

2. From education to moral agency and personhood

Waldow argues that Locke’s esteem-based education, which aims at habit training rather than conditioning, makes it possible for children to develop the cognitive capacities through which they can come to see themselves “as persons with morally evaluable qualities” (Waldow 2020, 74). Waldow argues for this view, for instance, in the following passage:

Locke’s habit training fosters the ability to engage in these processes; it provides children with the opportunity to abstract from their actions, build new idea connections (which means that they start to reason) and develop a perspective through which they can discover themselves as persons with morally evaluable qualities. Having the ability to think of oneself as a person worthy of esteem and disgrace and comprehending oneself as a moral

agent here seem to emerge in unison and as a result of reflections triggered through one's engagement with an intersubjective context. (Waldow 2020, 74)

In my view, it is worth considering further how Locke's esteem-based education can be reconciled with his moral views in the *Essay*. In Book II, chapter xviii—the chapter that immediately follows Locke's chapter “Of Identity and Diversity” (II.xxvii) Locke distinguishes three types of law, namely (i) divine law, (ii) civil law, and (iii) the law of opinion and reputation (see *Essay* II.xxviii.5–13). According to Locke, all of these laws require a lawmaker who has the power to enforce the laws by means of reward and punishment. As Locke argues, for each type of law there are distinctive “Enforcements, or Rewards and Punishments” (*Essay* II.xxviii.6). If actions are considered in relation to divine law, we judge whether actions are sins or duties; if actions are considered in relation to civil law, we judge whether they are criminal or innocent; and if they are considered in relation to the law of opinion and reputation whether they are virtues or vices (see *Essay* II.xxvii.7). Locke argues further that divine law “is the only true touchstone of *moral Rectitude*” (*Essay* II.xxviii.8 2–5).

There is sufficient textual evidence for the view that Lockean persons will ultimately be held accountable and rewarded and punished in accordance with divine law (see *Essay* II.xxvii.22, 26). This is a point that Waldow (2020, 88–91) acknowledges. However, I believe that further consideration can be given to how children or young adults come to learn about divine law and how they start to see themselves and their actions bound by divine law.³ Given Locke's and Waldow's view that children are best motivated by means of esteem and disgrace, it is plausible to argue that Locke's approach to education focuses in the first instance on the law of opinion and reputation. I would have liked to hear more about how children or young adults come to see divine law as “the only true touchstone of *moral Rectitude*” (*Essay* II.xxviii.8 2–5). As mentioned above, Waldow acknowledges that for Locke our cognitive capacities—such as the capacities to reason and reflect—develop gradually and that children, who in the early stages of their development rely on the guidance of parents or other caregivers, gradually start to follow their own reason. This could provide a clue for addressing my question. One may suggest that as children develop their reasoning capacities, they become able to enquire about the proper foundation of morality. Once they start using their reasoning capacities, they are in a position to investigate moral issues, which may lead them to discover divine law and the existence of a superior lawmaker who can enforce divine law by means of reward and punishment. This is merely a rough sketch of how it may be

³ For helpful further discussion of related issues, see Bolton (2008), Rossiter (2016), and Sreedhar and Walsh (2016).

possible to explain how children who are brought up by Locke's esteem-based education become moral agents or persons, who see their actions as bound by divine law. Waldow's proposal that *Some Thoughts* provides important background for understanding Locke's views on agency and personhood in the *Essay* could be strengthened by spelling out with more detail how Locke can explain the process through which children become moral agents.

3. Locke on actions, consciousness, and persons

I would like to take a closer look at another set of issues and consider what Lockean actions are and what role they play in Locke's accounts of persons, personal identity, and consciousness. Waldow argues that "in Locke's experience-based philosophy, claims about consciousness are crucially connected with claims about agency, given that it is one's actions, and the way they are experienced by oneself and others, that inform one's thoughts about the self" (2020, 75). Waldow sees actions as significant "for the conception we form of ourselves" (2020, 55), though she also notes that it does not follow from this that "Lockean persons are reducible to their actions" (2020, 55). Throughout his discussion of persons and personal identity in *Essay* II.xxvii, Locke speaks of the thoughts and actions that a person or self is conscious of and ascribes to herself. Thus, there is no doubt that actions play a central role in Locke's account of persons and personal identity. However, I believe that Waldow's understanding of Lockean actions can be questioned, because his text also leaves scope for a different interpretation of what an action is. Before we take a closer look at Locke's text, let me outline how Waldow understands Lockean actions. She writes:

when I speak of an action, I do not refer to physiological occurrences that could take place without being accompanied by consciousness. Rather, actions are conceived as *necessarily* involving consciousness in the sense that, *while* being performed, I (or someone else) am (is) conscious of what I (she) am (is) doing *as* my (her) action. So when talking about actions, we are not dealing with zombies, sleepwalkers, or intoxicated drunkards, who move around without being aware of what they are doing, but with Lockean persons (synchronically speaking), who exist at the time the relevant action is being performed and attribute this action to themselves." (Waldow 2020, 77–78)

While I accept that moral agency involves consciousness, there is textual evidence that speaks against Waldow's interpretation that for Locke actions necessarily involve consciousness. For

instance, in his chapter “Of Power” (*Essay* II.xxi) Locke claims that “there being but two sorts of Action, whereof we have any *Idea, viz.* Thinking and Motion” (*Essay* II.xxi.4).⁴ Locke here regards motions as actions. This means that unconscious bodily motions can be actions for Locke, contrary to Waldow’s understanding of action. This tension deserves closer examination. Waldow may argue that unconscious actions can be put aside in the context of Locke’s discussion of persons and personal identity in the *Essay*, since only the actions which a person performed with consciousness belong to the person. While such a move strikes me as plausible, it has implications about how we understand the role of consciousness in Locke’s account of persons and personal identity. As already mentioned, Waldow emphasizes that consciousness has an epistemic function insofar as consciousness enables a person to understand herself as a moral agent who will receive reward and punishment for her actions and by being conscious of past actions a person can comprehend why she is rewarded or punished for these actions. However, I believe it is worth asking whether consciousness also has other functions than the epistemic function that Waldow highlights. For example, Udo Thiel claims that for Locke “[c]onsciousness constitutes the person and its identity by unifying thoughts and actions” (2011, 121). If we accept that actions are not necessarily conscious, but that only some of them are performed with consciousness and others such as bodily motions can be unconscious, then interpretations like Thiel’s that argue that consciousness plays a constitutive role can help explain why Locke’s account of persons and personal identity focuses on conscious actions. Overall, I am inclined to think that consciousness plays a more important role in Locke’s discussion of persons and personal identity than Waldow acknowledges. I will return to these issues and elaborate further on them in the next section.

4. Consciousness and its role in Locke’s account of persons and personal identity

It is worth examining further whether consciousness plays merely an epistemic role in Locke’s account of persons and personal identity or whether it also plays a metaphysical or some other role. Waldow argues for her view that consciousness has an important epistemic function as follows:⁵

By rendering accessible to me what I did, consciousness acquires an important epistemic function. It enables me to *understand* my position as an accountable agent and, thereby,

⁴ See also Locke, *Essay* II.xxi.8, 72, II.xxviii.18.

⁵ See also Waldow (2020, 58, 76, 81, 86–88).

allows me to comprehend what it is that I am going to be punished for when facing judgment on the great day: “In the great Day, wherein the Secrets of all Hearts shall be laid open, it may be reasonable to think, no one shall be made to answer for what *he knows nothing of; but shall receive his Doom, his Conscience accusing or excusing him*” (*Essay* 2.27.22, emphasis added). (Waldow 2020, 76)

Waldow here draws attention to an important aspect of Locke’s view, namely that consciousness by revealing to me what I did makes it possible for me to understand why I am now held responsible for the past actions in question.

Waldow holds that Locke’s God plays an active role at the divine last judgement by reviving forgotten past experiences or by correcting false representation of past experiences. I am in agreement with her that God plays an active role at the last judgement, but in my view further consideration can be given to the question of what criterion God uses when he makes resurrected persons conscious of their past.⁶ Here are two possible criteria that God might use:⁷

- (a) God traces the continued existence of a human being.
- (b) God traces sameness of consciousness.

One serious difficulty with the proposal that God uses criterion (a) is that it neglects Locke’s view that it is important to distinguish the idea of a person from the idea of a human being or man. This conceptual distinction helps Locke to argue that persons rather than human beings are to be held accountable for their actions and will be resurrected in the afterlife. Moreover, Locke offers several examples that are meant to show that, at least theoretically, a person’s continued existence does not have to coincide with the continued existence of a human being. Therefore, it is more plausible that God uses a different criterion that traces the continued existence of a person rather than human being.

Criterion (b) overcomes these problems and focuses on the continued existence of persons, because Locke argues that personal identity consists in sameness of consciousness. Of course, there are challenges with spelling out in a non-circular way what sameness of consciousness is for Locke, but Locke scholars have made proposals how these challenges can be addressed. For instance, Shelley Weinberg (2012, 2016) suggests that God traces a metaphysical fact of

⁶ I develop my own views on these issues at greater length in Boeker (2021, ch. 8).

⁷ The following list is not meant to be exhaustive.

consciousness. My own proposal is that sameness of consciousness for Locke has a metaphysical foundation, which most likely has a relational structure (Boeker 2021).

By highlighting the epistemic and moral dimensions of Locke's view Waldow, as I understand her, intends to offer an alternative to more prominent metaphysical interpretations of Locke's account of personal identity. However, I am inclined to think that the epistemic reading that she offers could be reconciled with other readings that maintain that consciousness also has a metaphysical function. I would find it helpful if Waldow could clarify whether she holds that consciousness has only an epistemic function or whether she would be willing to acknowledge that consciousness can additionally have a metaphysical function, which can be relevant, for instance, when God traces a person's past at the last judgement. One advantage of acknowledging that consciousness has a metaphysical function in addition to an epistemic function is that it helps to take seriously Locke's conceptual distinction between persons and human beings. This distinction plays an important role in Locke's discussion of persons and personal identity in the *Essay*, but it is not present in *Some Thoughts*. Overall, I believe that there are convincing reasons for acknowledging that consciousness also has a metaphysical function. However, if Waldow accepts this move, one challenge for her interpretations will be that Locke does not explicitly distinguish between persons and human beings in *Some Thoughts*. To strengthen her view that Locke's account of persons and personal identity builds on his account of education it would be desirable to provide additional arguments that address this challenge.

To sum up, Waldow's chapter on Locke offers a very valuable contribution to existing scholarship on the topic and I hope it stimulates further discussion of how Locke's views on education are related with his views on personhood and moral agency.

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