SUBJECTIVITY AND INDIVIDUALITY: TWO STRANDS IN EARLY MODERN PHILOSOPHY

INTRODUCTION

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For generations of scholars the emergence of the notion of human subjectivity has marked the shift to philosophical modernity. Mainly traced back to Descartes's founding of philosophy on the *Cogito* and to Kant's 'Copernican Revolution',[1] the rise of subjectivity has been linked to the rise of the modern age in terms of a reconsideration of reality starting from an analysis of the human self and consciousness. Consequently, it has been related to long-standing issues of identity, individuation and individuality[2] as a foremost topic on the agenda of the philosophers. Only in recent times, however, have comprehensive studies on early modern theories of subjectivity and individuality become available to scholars. Taking into consideration a range of philosophers from Descartes to Wolff and beyond, in his *The Early Modern Subject. Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (2011) Udo Thiel has unveiled two strands in the treatment of these topics. First, an 'ontological' approach, i.e. the definition of what is an individual (either human or natural) in the light of considerations involving the notions of body, soul, and related concepts. This approach characterized the Scholastic debates on the individuation of natural and human beings, but also the analysis of Descartes: he faced the problems of subjectivity and individuation from the same standpoint of the Scholastics, i.e., by using the ontological notions of substance and mode.[3] Secondly, the consideration of individual beings from the standpoint of our conceptualization of them, that is, a more 'subjectivist' approach, adopted at first by Cartesians such as Johannes Clauberg and Arnold Geulincx, faced the problem of the re-conceptualization of the notions of unity and sameness as entities of reason rather than real attributes of things.[4] Eventually, anti-Cartesian thinkers such as Robert Boyle, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke shifted the attention from the problem of finding any ontological 'form' for individual beings to a consideration of the problem of individuality as identity through time;[5] as to personal identity, this came to be defined in term of self-consciousness alone.[6] Thiel has reassessed the connections between the notions of subjectivity, consciousness, identity through time and individuality, and has signalled a detachment of the problem of subjectivity from individuation as an ontological issue. Yet, the problems of individuation and subjectivity did not come to be unlinked: in the case of Leibniz, the general problem of individuation and identity constitutes the framework for the specific issue of personal identity,[7] notwithstanding the distinction "between the identity of a mental substance and personal identity."[8]

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The 'subjectivist' turn is reconstructed by Thiel by challenging the views expounded in the collection of essays edited by Kenneth Barber and Jorge Gracia, *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy* (1994), where Barber signals an 'epistemological' turn brought about by Descartes's *Meditations*, as for the first time ontological issues cannot be faced without an epistemological scrutiny.[9] In this collection of essays, Thomas Lennon accounts for Descartes's theory of individuation of singular, corporeal entities in a subjectivist way, that is, as depending on mental capacities of picking out singular objects from sensations. This is the result of Descartes's assumption that the only corporeal substance is an extended continuum. On the other hand, Descartes did not maintain this subjectivist view on the individuation of the mind, defined as a singular substance: this view was however defended by the French Cartesian Pierre-Sylvain Régis, who conceived of minds as bundles of qualities within one immaterial substance.[10] Accordingly, even if individuation could not play a central role in the definition of what a human subject is, the interest for individuation had been refuelled by the emergence of early modern notions of subjectivity, since individuality was considered from a 'subjectivist' standpoint.

The early modern process of reassessing human and natural individuality had far-reaching outcomes: the definition of what a singular entity is in a world deprived of substantial forms and individual substances different from human selves – brought about by Descartes –[11] has been studied in its consequences on accounts of causality and the explanation of natural phenomena. According to Daniel Garber's *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics* (1992), for instance, Descartes's view on motion as the individuation of bodies in a continuum of matter is "damaging" for the individuation of bodies at rest and for bodies conceived in an instant.[12] As underlined by Thiel, indeed, for Descartes only the human body has a real individual nature, insofar it is joined to an immaterial substance[13]. Therefore, Descartes's ontology of singular bodies seems to undermine the causal explanation of natural phenomena, as these are accounted for by appealing to the existence of individual entities. As pointed out by Han van Ruler, the impact of Descartes's theory of substance prompted the emergence of alternative accounts not only of human being, but also of natural agency, such as the various forms of 'occasionalism', as an answer to the 'crisis of causality' of the seventeenth century.[14]

Not surprisingly, the Cartesian theories of human subjectivity and individuality are now an object of increasing interest not only in philosophical historiography, but also in cognitive science. The emergence of a more convincing picture of early modern ways of conceiving the self and the individual body – as the 'psycho-physiological' reading of Cartesian subject – have replaced long-standing dualistic views characterizing works like Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error* (1994), and have led historians to acknowledge Descartes's heritage in behavioural sciences.[15] We are now witnessing not only a historical reassessment of previously vaguely defined notions, but the emergence of a new branch of historical-philosophical studies with potential consequences in multiple fields of analysis.

Since the complexity of these topics and of their historiographical treatment is increasing, the only way to shed light on them is to intensify the debate itself. As a

multi-authored collection of essays, the present issue of *Society and Politics* is not aimed at addressing or endorsing a particular position in these debates: rather, it questions and calls attention to the issues of subjectivity and individuality in their historical development, encouraging the debate on topics recently analysed. The structure of the issue itself reflects the fact that the development of this debate is in its early stages: since a systematic account of the methodology of the study of subjectivity has not been yet provided, the essays of this issue follow a chronological order. However, a variety of theoretical angles can be acknowledged: this issue aims to offer a round view of the early modern approaches to subjectivity and individuality.

The first essay, *Early modern subjects and the self-conception of philosophy in Germany 1556-1599* by Stefan Hessbrüggen-Walter assumes a meta-philosophical perspective: it concerns the notion of *subiectum* as an actor's category in early modern philosophy, and ascertains that this notion can be related to a contemporary concept of subjectivity. Focusing on the early modern notion of subject as the foundation of a discipline, the author shows that reflexivity and self-awareness as features of contemporary notions of subjectivity can be legitimately ascribed to the notion of subject as the foundation of philosophy, as it is a discipline aimed at the transformation of the soul. Analysing various treatments of *subiectum* in 16th-century Germany, Hessbrüggen-Walter reveals how this conception was upheld by philosophers as Paxmann and Liddell, but was also criticised heavily on the basis of different definitions of philosophy and its *subiectum*, as well as of the relation between the definition of philosophy and the possibility of philosophical reflection itself.

The two following contributions concern the topic of individuation from an ontological standpoint. In his *Oliva Sabuco and the matter of the matter* Steven Barbone presents an analysis of the *Nueva Filosofia de la Naturaleza del Hombre* (1587) of the Spanish philosopher Oliva Sabuco, unveiling her theory of the individuation of human being. Sabuco's account of human nature is physiological: mind and soul – which are two different entities, while not different substances – communicate through *chilo* in pia and dura mater. Accordingly, man is a "psycho-corporeal unity" or a composite substance of form and matter. This substance, however, is individuated by matter rather than by form: as the case of the human offspring demonstrates, it is the difference in the physiologically determined matter of semen, rather than in the form of the whole body, that gives rise to different human individual. Sabuco anticipated Descartes's account of interaction by placing it in brain, but she maintained a hylomorphic view which was decidedly non-Cartesian.

The third study, *The* recentior nominalis *of Leibniz's* Disputatio metaphysica de principio individui*: Fulgentius Schauteet and his* Controversia *against the Thomistic doctrine on the principle of individuation* of Chiara Catalano focuses on Leibniz's account of individuation, expounded in the *De principio individui* and traced back, apart from Thomasius, to Fulgentius Schauteet's criticisms of the Thomistic theory of individuation. In his *Controversiae*, Schauteet holds the view that the principle of individuation is twofold: internal (either physical, or the very nature of the thing, or logical, or the way we conceive it) and external, consisting of the accidents of the individual thing. On the other hand, both Thomasius and Leibniz opposed the Thomistic solution according to a Nominalist standpoint: that is, holding the view that

the actual existence of a thing is its whole nature and its very individuality. This position is akin to Schauteet's, with the difference that Leibniz did not hold a logical account of individuation, which only relies on the physical nature of the thing.

The last two contributions focus on the human self as such, and involve different angles of analysis. In the fourth article, *Hume's individual: agent or billiard ball?* Hannah Dawson reverses a longstanding view of Hume's individuals as passive subjects determined by custom. Even if this view is grounded in Hume's theory of man, where custom is the main factor behind human behaviour, a narrower attention to Hume's analysis of artificial virtues reveals a more complex Humean individuality. Guided by nature in the acknowledgement of the sensible advantages brought by artificial habits and the submission to the State, rationality and invention still play a consistent role in the political agency of men. What results is a holistic view of the self, considered as a historical product of the life of individuals and where the dichotomies of reason and passion, freedom and custom are softened. Eventually, as habit consolidates such artifices, custom turns out to be a factor of human freedom.

The last article, *Diderot and materialist theories of the self* by Charles Wolfe, challenges the use of the idea of the self as a source for anti-naturalism in philosophy. As an antidote to this tendency in history, endorsed time to time from Descartes to Husserl, Wolfe proposesa materialist theory for which the self can be 1) part of a system of external relations, 2) an organic unity and the condition of biological individuality, 3) an interpretative activity of the brain. This theory overcomes the idea of materialism both as a mechanization of the world, and as a mind-body identity reductionism. In fact, the theory can be traced back to some intermediate position: first and foremost, to Diderot's treatment of the self, which combines the three mentioned views as variously upheld by Spinoza, Dom Deschamps and La Mettrie. Eventually, a materialist theory of the self has the outcome of re-defining externalism (or the denial of the inaccessibility to the facts of consciousness) as a biologization of individuality instead of a mere ontology of relations.

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References

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[2] 'Individualitas' primarily originates in the translations of Avicenna: cf. Avicenna, *Logica*, in *Avicene perhypatetici philosophi ac medicorum facile primi opera in luce redacta* (Venetiis: per Bonetum Locatellum, 1508), 12v, col. 1. On medieval debates on individuation, see Gracia, J. J. E. (ed.), *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).

[3] Thiel, U., *The Early Modern Subject. Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36-43.
[4] Thiel, U., (2011), 72-73.
[5] "And this is how the shift of attention from individuation to diachronic identity is linked to the development of a subjectivist treatment of the issue: as substantial forms are denied and no 'principle' of identity could be discovered in the things themselves, it is recognized that their identity must depend on what we regard as their essential constituents; in other words, what becomes crucial now are our criteria for judging whether or not a body has remained the same through change", Thiel, U., (2011), 75.
[6] Thiel, U., (2011), 109.
[7] Thiel, U., (2011), 280.
[8] Thiel, U., (2011), 279.
[9] "Ontological claims concerning the existence of material objects, of God, and even of the self, must be subjected to a most rigorous epistemological scrutiny before one (or at least Descartes) is entitled to accept those claims", Barber, K., *Introduction*, in *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. K. Barber, J. J. E. Gracia (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 1-9: 5. For Thiel's critique, see Thiel, U., "'Epistemologism' and Early Modern Debates about Individuation and Identity", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 5 (1997): 353-72.
[10] Lennon, T., *The Problem of Individuation among the Cartesians*, in Barber, K., Gracia, J. J. E., (1994), 13, 27.
[11] See Rodis-Lewis, G., *L'Individualité selon Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1950), and Hattab, H., *Descartes on Forms and Mechanisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[12] Garber, D., *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 174-81.
[13] Thiel, U., (2011), 39-40.
[14] Ruler, H. van, *The Crisis of Causality: Voetius and Descartes on God, Nature and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), and Renz, U., Ruler, H. van, *Okkasionalismus*, in Enzyklopädie Philosophie, ed. H. J. Sandkühler (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2010), vol. 2, 1843-6.
[15] Damasio, A., *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam Publishing, 1994); Hatfield, G., "The Passions of the Soul and Descartes's Machine Psychology", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 38/1 (2007): 1-35.