

Recent Studies and Considerations on Personhood, Identity and Consciousness in Locke's Thought

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Abstract: This brief note aims to explore some of the most recent contributions on Locke's philosophy and the continental philosophy of the late 17th century, which offer fresh conceptual material for mapping out a novel concept of consciousness and personal identity. During the 17th century, certain key terms in epistemology and the history of thought came to acquire new connotations alongside the more classical ones. The notions of conscience, identity and personhood play a central role; in particular, in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and in his theory of knowledge these concepts are indebted to certain aspects of Cudworth's thought on conscience and to the intense exchange of correspondence with Molyneux on the topics of consciousness, responsibility and the juridical accountability of the individual.

Keywords: personal identity, persons, consciousness, memory, responsibility, Locke, Cudworth

1. *Some recent studies*

The fundamental and enigmatic issues of Locke's metaphysics that have engaged numerous scholars – not only historians of philosophy, but also epistemologists and philosophers of mind and ethics – include, recently in particular, those connected with concepts of personhood, identity and consciousness. These concepts were addressed by Locke's very first readers and critics, and have since been a constant subject of analysis in articles and essays. In the 1980s, they were brought powerfully to the top of the agenda of Lockean historiography by Udo Thiel, who devoted to the subject of personal identity, individuation and self-consciousness studies that remain unsurpassed and a benchmark for those interested in these topics and the metaphysics of John Locke.

In the early 2000s, Christopher Hugues Conn's *Locke on Essence and Identity* brought to the fore the epistemological meshing characterising such issues, linking them to pivotal philosophical questions such as that of substances and their properties, essential and natural properties and their persistence or relativity. Focusing on the critical analysis and the rejection of essentialism in Locke's reflections, Conn also offers an analytic overview of this aspect of his metaphysics without neglecting the fundamental studies of American and English scholars and the contributions of Udo Thiel and Jean-Michel Vienne.

The book by K. Joanna S. Forstrom, *John Locke and Personal Identity* (2010), concentrates usefully on analysis of Locke's position apropos four distinct philosophical perspectives on the subjects of identity, personal immortality and bodily resurrection as expounded by eminent 17th-century thinkers: Descartes, Hobbes, the Cambridge Platonists and Boyle. These writers were the cardinal points of the context in which Locke was moving, and it was through his relations with them that Locke moved beyond scholastic Aristotelianism turning not only towards new philosophical interpretations but also to the new contributions of science in the perspective of a renewed understanding of religious questions and political reflection on society. This book contextualises Locke's observations on and responses to these thinkers, whose works represent a conceptual turning point. It takes its cue from the urgings of Molyneux spurring Locke to a deeper discussion of issues such as the *principium individuationis* and the doctrine of eternal truths, and to take a position on the scholarly debate in Oxford between theologians and philosophers. Forstrom's study is rounded off by an analysis of the considerations on Locke's theory of knowledge made by several critics, including Joseph Butler and Thomas Reid, and a valuable specific bibliography.

In *Locke's Moral Man* (2012), Antonia LoLordo stresses how Locke – not only in view of the second edition of the *Essay*, and on Molyneux's encouragement to add a chapter on identity – had already been delineating this question in his critical reflections on the Cartesian concept of soul in the first edition. The author casts light on the profound interweave between the question of identity and the moral and metaphysical issues. Locke in fact confirms the need to know the individual's personal identity in order to determine which of his correctly judged actions permit him to receive reward or condemnation in the life after death. Knowledge of and responsibility for past actions are therefore aspects that not only affect the concepts of ethics, but are also closely connected with the question of the materiality or immateriality of substance and the concept of power which, not incidentally, is dealt with in one of the chap-

ters most significantly reworked in the second edition of the *Essay*. LoLordo also stresses the way in which concepts of liberty, personal identity and rationality are closely linked to the issue of moral action. An awareness of these interconnections between metaphysics, ethics and ontology brings the centrality of personal identity significantly to the fore, allowing us to fully understand the meaning of the conceptual nexus of person within Locke's thought. This crucial point was also the focus of the author's recent contribution, "Persons in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy", in the book edited by her devoted entirely to this issue *Persons: A History* (2019).

With a new focus on the theory of knowledge and moral agency, Shelley Weinberg addresses the concepts of *consciousness* and *self-consciousness* in the history of modern thought and, more specifically, how they play out in Locke's philosophy. The first chapter of her book is devoted chiefly to the 18th-century developments of the concept of *conscientia*/consciousness and the deriving interpretive issues in the thought of Descartes and Hobbes. As well as analysing aspects of the philosophy of Malebranche and Arnauld, who continue their reflections in the Cartesian sphere employing the concept of consciousness as a self-referential form of non-evaluative knowledge, this chapter underscores Cudworth's role as the first English philosopher to attribute a specific philosophical semantics to the term "consciousness". The remaining four packed chapters of *Consciousness in Locke* (2016) analyse the implications of the concept of consciousness in terms of the theory of knowledge – in its Lockean articulations of sensitive, intuitive and demonstrative – of personal identity, as expressed in the *Essay* but also more generally in the philosophical psychology and the theories of knowledge and moral agency that permeate Locke's reflections.

On the strength of this fine batch of studies, Ruth Boeker was recently able to offer an innovative approach to the concepts of person and personal identity through a meticulous discussion and analysis of the contributions that have fuelled the lively debate on this topic since the mid-20th century. Her book *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity* (2021) pivots on the question of moral accountability, entailing an accurate definition of the subject/object of the accountability. She analyses the necessary distinction between the notion of person and that of human being and of substance, and of what makes a person subject to the appraisal of their action for the purpose of obtaining reward or moral condemnation in the life after death. These are central issues in the thought of Locke, who devoted many long years to the study and paraphrase of the letters of St. Paul. He was therefore fully aware that for all Christian believers faith in the resurrection is the fundamental point in Paul's message,

so that it was crucial to provide a reply about the continuity of existence of the person. From as far back as the 1680s, Locke had made a distinction between person, man and substance, and in the famous chapter of the *Essay* he reiterated the fact that consciousness, the sameness of consciousness, constitutes the concept of personal identity and is what makes happiness or misery possible at the time of the resurrection of the dead. Through 11 chapters and the review of an extensive bibliography, Boeker examines Locke's approach to the concept of identity through the distinction between individuation and identity, underlines the legal/forensic connotation of the term "person" and brings up an illuminating relation between this concept and the reflections on power that Locke had addressed in an important chapter of the *Essay*. Compared with previous literature, the scholar offers a more comprehensive definition of the concept of "same consciousness", in which the revival of the past actions and thoughts become central through memory, mineness, and duration. This analysis and definition of the concept of personal identity brings together a plurality of metaphysical, religious, epistemological and psychological aspects, making it possible to imagine a life after death that does not call for a stance on the issue of materiality or immateriality of the thinking substance that has been so hotly debated from Locke's first readers up to the most recent critical literature. Finally, this detailed analysis of the concepts of person and personal identity allows the author to better delineate the characteristics that distinguished Locke's thought from Cartesianism and from the positions of Hobbes, and to grasp the importance of his influence on the thought of Shaftesbury and Hume.

2. *From conscience to consciousness*

These important studies – along with numerous other contributions, essays and articles that have appeared since the last quarter of the 20th century – have brought back to centre stage the philosophical-analytical interweaves of the concepts of identity, person and consciousness, contextualising them within metaphysics, ethics and politics, the religious conception of Locke and the 17th-18th-century European debate.

A key term in epistemology and the history of thought, in the course of the 17th century "conscientia"/"conscience", came to acquire new connotations alongside the more classical meanings of "knowing something in com-

mon with” – *Conscientia est actus, importat enim ordinem et applicationem scientiae ad aliquid*¹ – and the self-reflective concept of the intellect, “knowing something for oneself” – *cognitionem cordis sui ipsius*². Also traditionally present and widespread in the English world is the use of the term “conscience”, implicitly containing a moral judgement regarding the good or bad deeds committed – *conscientia... per quod aut accusatur res mala, aut defenditur bona*³. However, over the 17th century both the concepts proposed by the textbooks and dictionaries, such as those of Antoine Le Roy, Goclenius and Richter, and the Cartesian notion of conscience, stripped of its moral connotations to play a central role in his theory of knowledge, were all still going strong. For Descartes and the Cartesians the term “conscientia” comprises numerous shades of meaning: reflexivity, remembering etc.: “to be conscious is both to think and to reflect upon one’s thought” (*Conversation with Burman*). It is also important to note (as already underscored by Balibar) that the term *con-science* used by the French translator Pierre Coste to translate Locke’s concept of *consciousness* is practically a neologism in relation to the meaning (as he himself explains in a note to the text), since it designates not a faculty of the soul but the individual, a “metonymic personification” that binds consciousness closely to actions and experience. A conception of the consciousness that hence fits into the panorama of the debate on the liberty of conscience generated by the Reformation⁴.

It is worth recalling, albeit only briefly, the use that Cudworth made of the concept *conscientia* in the sense of “consciousness” that he was the first to attribute to it, or at least which he was responsible for establishing within the late 17th-century philosophical vocabulary. It continues to be essential to refer to the extensive analyses proposed by John Rogers on the thought of the Cambridge Neoplatonists, and on Udo Thiel’s argument that “Cudworth’s statements about consciousness are, mostly, not part of an analysis of human subjec-

¹ A. Le Roy, *Floretum philosophicum seu ludus Meudonianus in terminos totius philosophiae*, I. Dedin, Paris 1649, p. 48.

² C.P. Richter, *Lexicon ethicum omnium terminorum usitatorum*, Simonis Halbmayeri, Norimbergae 1627, p. 103.

³ Ibid. p. 104. See in particular U. Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject. Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011; Id., “Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity”, in K. Haakonssen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 286-318; F. Giampietri, “‘Consientia mutabilis’. I significati della coscienza nei lessici filosofici latini del Seicento”, in R. Palaia (ed.), “*Coscienza*” *nella filosofia della prima modernità*, Olschki Editore, Florence 2013, pp. 91-114.

⁴ É. Balibar, “A propos de l’invention lockienne: conscience et identité personnelle”, in R. Palaia (ed.), “*Coscienza*” *nella filosofia della prima modernità*, cit., pp. 19-34, p. 30.

tivity, but of a metaphysical account of reality in general – an account which affirms the traditional idea of a scale of nature, drawing heavily on Plotinus⁵. One of the most significant passages in which Cudworth addresses the subject of consciousness, which he calls *Express Consciousness*, is in the *Digression of the True Intellectual System*, where he analyses the possible existence of a vital energy, more precisely plastic nature, that acts neither through knowledge nor through animal instinct nor through deliberate choice, but as an energetic and executive principle constructed by God to make the established things happen⁶.

In these few lines it is not possible to explore the enthralling issue of plastic nature. Suffice it to observe that Cudworth defines consciousness as precisely counterbalanced to plastic nature, the plastic powers of which are immaterial but devoid of consciousness. Indeed, for Cudworth there can exist a vital energy

which is not accompanied with that *Fancie*, or *Consciousness*, that is in the *Energies of the Animal Life*, that is, a nature that is not accompanied by “Consense and Consciousness which makes a Being to be Present with it self, Attentive to its own Actions, or Animaversitive of them, to perceive it self to Do or Suffer, and to have a Fruition or Enjoyment of it self⁷.

Locke was to take up precisely this statement in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, more specifically in book two, chapter one, paragraph eleven, where he agrees with those who claim that the soul of a waking man is never without thought, because such is the very condition of being awake, while at the same time he asks himself if a waking man should not similarly consider whether a man, understood in his entirety of body and spirit, can sleep without having any dream “it being hard to conceive, that any thing should think, and not be conscious of it. If the Soul doth think in a sleeping Man, without being conscious of it, I ask, whether, during such thinking, it has any Pleasure or Pain, or be capable of Happiness or Misery?”⁸

It is worth considering afresh the insights emerging in the deep discussions that took place in the correspondence between Locke and Molyneux. On 20

⁵ U. Thiel, “Cudworth and Seventeenth-Century Theories of Consciousness,” in S. Gaukroger (ed.), *The Uses of Antiquity*, Springer, Dordrecht, 1991, p. 87.

⁶ R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, London, 1678, p. 161, § 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159, § 16.

⁸ J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P.H. Nidditch, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979, p. 110, § 11.

September 1692, Locke wrote to Molyneux, “You have, I perceive, read it [the *Essay*] over so carefully, more than once, that I know no body I can more reasonably consult about the mistakes and defects of it”⁹, launching an intense exchange which was to have a significant influence on various sections and chapters of the *Essay*. These letters, as well as touching on issues of Irish politics and the education of children, ponder the famous problem of whether a man born blind who then recovers his sight is capable of recognising an object without touching it. Then, more pertinent to our subject here, from December 1692 and throughout the whole of the following year, the main subjects addressed in their correspondence were the definition of “power” and of “individual identity”. In this short note it is not possible to dwell further on this fascinating epistolary dialogue between Locke and Molyneux, since it would digress rather from the issue¹⁰.

And so, within this panorama, what was the position of Locke’s hermeneutics in relation to the interpretations of Christian anthropology and to the question of the limited, imperfect, ragged condition represented by human corporeality and how, for example, this will be transfigured in the resurrection? Does the *pristina materia* of the human body persist as inalterable baggage? How did the philosopher address the relation between body and soul, between a temporary and corruptible body and its incorruptible, immortal soul incarnated in that body, in a word, its spiritualisation? These subjects have been widely addressed in the essays collected in the book *Locke and Biblical Hermeneutics. Conscience and Scripture*¹¹. For Locke, the resurrection and the Last Judgement are the parameters of the moral law and its necessity. Although he confirms that Revelation allows the individual to access truths that remain inaccessible to the reason (which is where his defence of miracles and its anthropology is to be found), nevertheless in the last resort it is the Reason that must endorse what is to be accepted as authentic¹².

⁹ J. Locke, *Correspondence*, 8 vols., ed. by E.S. De Beer, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1976-89, vol. 4, letter 1538. Molyneux replied on 22 December 1692, but the entire correspondence between the two thinkers deserves further attention.

¹⁰ The issues mentioned here are discussed at length in the contribution “Consciousness and identity: Cudworth and Locke” in print at Springer.

¹¹ Among the other essays in the volume see L. Simonutti, “Locke’s Biblical Hermeneutics on Bodily Resurrection”, in L. Simonutti (ed.), *Locke and Biblical Hermeneutics. Conscience and Scripture*, Springer, Cham 2019, pp. 55-73. See also Ead., “Il sacro e la carne. Calvino versus Lelio Sozzini e i suoi seguaci”, in F. Giaccone (ed.), *Calvin insolite*, Garnier, Paris, 2012, pp. 487-504.

¹² W.M. Spellman, *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1988, p. 72.

The role of the body remains central to Locke's work, and certain images can help us to visually grasp an aspect that is also present in Renaissance and Baroque sacred art, as illustrated in the painting by Guido Cagnacci, *Magdalene raised by an angel* where, in what is almost a visual sleight of hand, despite being carried by an angel, the Magdalene's body appears to be duplicated in its ascent to heaven. Another famous example, this time indeed of Neoplatonic inspiration, is Botticelli's *Primavera*: we can see here a detail in which the enamoured Zephyrus is abducting the nymph Chloris; as a result of this gesture, Chloris appears again alongside, transformed into the goddess Flora, the personification of Spring is shown as a woman wearing a beautiful flowered gown, scattering on the ground the flowers held in a fold of the gown at her waist. An allusion to this transformation is suggested by the shoots of flowers emerging from the mouth of Chloris as she is being carried off. Significantly, both these bodies are being carried up to heaven, spiritualised – one in a religious representation and the other in a pagan one – albeit without their carnality being castigated.

3. *Consciousness, memory, responsibility*

Locke does not ascribe the ontological reasons for the affirmation of the “spiritualisation of the body” at the time of the resurrection and for the immortality of the soul to a traditional conception of the immateriality of substance, but rather places them within the peremptory affirmation of the concept of personal identity expounded in the respective chapter in the second edition of the *Essay*, which appeared in 1694¹³. In his distinction between “man” and “person” Locke seeks a possible answer to the anomaly of the resurrection, an answer that does not contradict reasoning and that does not attenuate man's individual responsibility at the final judgement. These are questions that Locke posed in the first pages of the *Essay* where he examines the innateness of certain speculative and practical principles, including the idea of identity, pondering “whether a man, being a creature consisting of soul and body, be the same man when his body is changed? Whether Euphorbus and Pythagoras, having had the same soul, were the same men, though they lived several ages asunder?”¹⁴ It thus becomes imperative to determine whether the body that is resurrected is

¹³ Ibid. See also E.T. Olson, “Personal Identity”, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>

¹⁴ J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, cit., L. I. ch. III, § 4.

the imperfect body or a new one, and thus resolve the question of identity. The issues of the resurrection of the flesh and of the Last Judgement, the notions of “spiritualisation of the body” and the affirmation of the immortality of the soul, are hence not circumscribed solely by the notion of the “principium individuationis” and a traditional conception of the immateriality of substance, but rather set within the incontrovertible assertion of the concept of personal identity. Already in the first edition of the *Essay*, to those who argued that the soul thought during its profound sleep Locke had objected the difficulty of such an act of thought taking place without there being any consciousness of it, going on to argue with clarity the famous example of the soul of Castor and Pollux¹⁵.

It should be stressed that in the early drafts, at the beginning of the 1670s, Locke never uses the term *consciousness*, a term and concept which were instead to become pivotal in the first and, to an even greater extent, the second edition of the *Essay*. Indeed, precisely in response to the urgings expressed by William Molyneux in the letters of 1693, Locke dedicated an entire new chapter to “On Identity and Diversity”, almost a stand-alone treatise, inserted in the second edition of the *Essay*¹⁶.

This being premised, to find wherein *personal identity* consists, we must consider what *person* stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider *itself as itself*, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to *perceive without perceiving* that he does perceive¹⁷.

Consciousness, memory and responsibility also mark the ontological difference between Locke’s meditation and the Cartesian mechanistic, Neoplatonic and corpuscularian position of his friend Boyle. An oak tree has a continuous organisation of all its parts and atoms conforming with its vegetable existence; a watch is an organisation of parts constructed to a certain end, and something similar can be said of animals; and so, the philosopher asks himself, in what way is man different and what does his identity consist of? Moreover, if the body and the nature of matter and the consciousness that brings together

¹⁵ Ibid., L. II, ch. I. §§ 11-12.

¹⁶ See Spellman, *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity*, cit., p. 63; E.T. Olson, *Personal Identity*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, cit.

¹⁷ J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, cit., L. II, ch. XXVII, § 9.

in the same person actions that are distant from each other had no importance, and it were the soul alone that made a man the same man, then it would be possible to assume “Seth, Ismael, Socrates, Pilate, St. Austin, and Caesar Borgia, to be the same man”¹⁸, in other words, men of completely different tempers living in different periods. Finally, the transmigration of souls would become a feasible hypothesis. Locke goes on to recount numerous strange examples and bizarre stories, including that of the transmigration of the soul of Heliogabalus into one of his hogs, after which he concludes convincingly that no one would claim that the hog was a man or Heliogabalus, and then again the story of the rational, philosopher parrot of Prince Maurice, in response to which it follows that it is not the idea of a thinking or rational being alone that defines the idea of a *man*. Locke concludes:

When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. [...] For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be what he calls *self*; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists *personal identity*, i.e. the sameness of a rational being¹⁹.

A few paragraphs further on Locke steers his reasoning towards the still open question of the resurrection:

And thus may we be able, without any difficulty, to conceive the same person at the resurrection, though in a body not exactly in make or parts the same which he had here, the same consciousness going along with the soul that inhabits it²⁰.

However, Locke continues, if this consciousness is necessary in the face of the changes that have taken place in the body (ageing, disease, degeneration or other changes that the philosopher does not specify), the soul alone is not sufficient to warrant or guarantee that it is the same man. Locke takes the example of the soul of a prince – carrying with it the consciousness of the past life of the prince – which enters into the body of a cobbler replacing the soul that had deserted it, and which thus causes him to act responsibly as a prince. But since the body contributes to make the man, despite all his princely thoughts he would continue to be the same person; in the eyes of other people, Locke

¹⁸ Ibid., § 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., § 9.

²⁰ Ibid., § 15.

asks himself, would not the cobbler be the same man as before? Consciousness and responsibility are the nexus of another aspect closely bound up with the resurrection, namely that of punishment or salvation which, according to the Apostle, on the great day on which the secrets of all hearts are brought to light, each will receive according to his deeds.

The sentence shall be justified by the consciousness all persons shall have, that they themselves, in what bodies soever they appear, or what substances soever that consciousness adheres to, are the same that committed those actions, and deserve that punishment for them²¹.

4. *Concluding Remarks: knowledge and errant conscience*

As a result of the stimulating studies analysed at the beginning of this note, and the numerous contributions which, for reasons of space, it is not possible to mention here – for which we refer to the invaluable bibliographies of the aforementioned works – in conclusion it is interesting to make at least a reference to the intense exchange between Locke and Molyneux on the discussion of the relations between consciousness, responsibility and the accountability of the individual that ends the long chapter twenty-seven of the *Essay*. The Irishman returns to the draft of the chapter “Of Identity and Diversity” and the question of just punishment which – according to Locke – must be meted out to those who commit misdeeds in a state of drunkenness or while sleepwalking. The sentence must be issued, despite the fact that, when sober or awake, such individuals can be considered as distinct persons from those of their states of “unconsciousness”. Pursuing his logical interrogatives, Locke clarifies that it is only through the consciousness that personality can extend beyond the present existence to the past, and as a consequence of this become engaged in and responsible for it, recognising as its own and attributing to itself actions belonging to the past in the same way that it acknowledges present actions as its own²². Thus, as regards the example of the drunken man or the sleepwalker, Locke is convinced that both must be justly punished by the law²³, that is by worldly, human justice, despite the fact that this is not able to distinguish with

²¹ *Ibid.*, § 26.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ The correction was suggested to Locke by Molyneux in the letter of 17 February 1694. See J. Locke, *Correspondence*, cit., letter no. 1712, p. 21.

certainty between reality and counterfeit or intention, and so, even in the case of the sleepwalker, the ignorance is not admitted as a plea²⁴.

But Locke's argument does not satisfy Molyneux, essentially because it makes a comparison between two cases that are ontologically distinct:

In the Case of the Night-walker your answer is true, full, and satisfactory; but that in the Drunkards Case is somewhat short. The night-walker is a sort of Distemper, not to be helpd or prevented by the Patient. But Drunkenes is a Deliberate Act which a man may easily avoid and Prevent. Moreover, whatever the Law appoint in this Case, I think, were I on the Jury of One who walking in his sleep had killd an other, I should not Violate a Good Conscience, if I acquitted Him; for he is certainly During those fits non Compos Mentis; and it were easy to Distinguish by Circumstances How far he Counterfitted or Not²⁵.

Nonetheless, Locke's reply is unwavering:

You doubt whether my answer be full in the case of the drunkard. To try whether it be or no, we must consider what I am there doing. As I remember (for I have not that chapter here by me) I am there shewing that punishment is annexed to personality, and personality to consciousness: How then can a drunkard be punish'd for what he did, whereof he is not conscious? To this I answer, Human judicatures justly punish him, because the fact is proved agains him; but want of consciousness cannot be proved for him.

In the fourth edition of the *Essay* Locke then added these very words, written to his Irish friend in 1693, in paragraph 22 of the twenty-seventh chapter which ended evoking the lesson of St Paul: "But 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"²⁶.

Locke did not explore this reflection further, whereas, in those very same years the question of the "errant conscience" was coming to the fore in other lines of thought. He also distanced himself from those "Christian Platonists"²⁷ who believed that if the same immaterial substance is united with a body it constitutes the same person, whereas for Locke (as he indicated when speaking

²⁴ J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, cit., L. II, ch. XXVII, § 22.

²⁵ J. Locke, *Correspondence*, cit., letter no. 1685, p. 767 (23 December 1693).

²⁶ J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, cit., p. 344.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, L. II, ch. XXVII, § 14, p. 339.

of the resurrection) it is the consciousness accompanying the soul inhabiting that body that constitutes the person. Indeed, even if the body of Thersites were made of the same particles as that of Nestor, or if some particles of the body of the former had become part of the body of the latter, this would not make them the same person, whereas if Thersites, even on just one occasion, were to be conscious of any one of the actions of Nestor, then Thersites would be the same person as Nestor²⁸.

The notion of the consciousness of personal responsibility is one of the salient features of Locke's reconstruction of a complex, rational and theological individual who no longer identifies with the hereditary nature of original sin, a heredity that morphs into a political bond and a disempowering and debilitating slavery. In his distinction between "man" and "person" Locke finds a possible answer to the definition of the identity as consciousness, memory and responsibility. He measures his thoughts against the suggestions of the Cambridge Neoplatonists – also through his epistolary exchanges with Lady Masham and Molyneux – and offers fresh conceptual material for mapping out a novel concept of consciousness and of personal identity, pointing to a way of release from all forms of coercion: the path that was to be taken by 18th-century man²⁹.

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²⁸ Ibid., p. 340.

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