Udo Thiel
The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume.
Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.
xiii + 483 pages
$110.00 (cloth ISBN 978–0–19–954249–9)

A historiographical commonplace portrays early modern philosophy as turning to the individual subject. This claim is hardly deniable (although philosophy in this period focuses on many other issues as well); however, it is also hardly informative as it stands, as it remains vague. This book gives substance to this claim in two respects: it traces the emergence and development of the early modern debate on both consciousness and personal identity. These are not separate issues, for since Locke, consciousness has become central to personal identity.

Consciousness and personal identity are at the intersection of various sub-fields such as theology, philosophy of mind, epistemology, ethics, and law. To a greater or lesser extent, the book touches on all of these themes. This wide range of topics, however, is not the most distinguishing feature of the book. Instead, it distinguishes itself first and foremost through the remarkably wide range of authors it discusses. It is the main virtue of this book not to focus merely on the canonical early modern philosophers such as Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Leibniz, Wolff, and Hume, but also to take into account a long list of less-known or almost unknown authors such as Cuenz, Lee, Becconsall, Roche, South, Grove, Müller, Knutzen, Eberhard, Sulzer, Mérian, and many more.

The book's chapters are ordered chronologically. Thiel presents the positions of prominent early modern figures first and then lays out the debates these positions prompted. Descartes and several of his followers receive a short treatment in chapter 1. Cartesian themes as they occur in British context are taken up in chapter 7. The same is true for Malebranchian themes in chapter 8. Locke, who is discussed more extensively than other authors, is subject of chapters 3 and 4. The huge debate Locke sparked is mainly presented in chapters 5 and 6. But Locke's account of personal identity remains a constant point of reference throughout all the later chapters of the book. Berkeley's views are very shortly addressed in chapter 8. The views of Leibniz, Wolff and the subsequent debate are examined in chapters 9 to 11. Finally, chapters 12 and 13 are devoted to Hume.

The central theme of the book is personal identity. Consciousness is discussed to some extent in its own right. But these discussions often stand in the service of clarifying conceptions of personal identity. Early on in the book, Thiel reports an important observation concerning early modern authors' understanding of what they are referring to when using terms like 'conscientia' (Latin), 'conscience' (French), 'consciousness' (English), and 'Bewusstsein' (German). They did not understand consciousness as relating to external objects, but as being inner-directed and as referring to one's own mental states (5–8). Early modern authors used these terms to refer to mental-state-consciousness rather than external-object-consciousness.

Thiel depicts the early modern debate on mental-state-consciousness as revolving around three questions: First, are all mental states or only some mental states objects of consciousness? Second, does mental-state-consciousness imply self-consciousness? Finally, how can mental-state-consciousness be explained?

The first question has a well-known answer: Since Descartes, mental-state-consciousness was considered to be a necessary feature of mental states, until Leibniz broke with this doctrine and effectively introduced the idea of unconscious mental states. Interestingly, Thiel shows that during Leibniz' lifetime there is another author, John Sergeant, breaking with the Cartesian doctrine. Sergeant rejects the idea that minds are conscious of all their thoughts (193–4). However, whereas Sergeant seems to think that 'unconscious' mental states nevertheless accompany external-object-consciousness, Leibniz goes one step further. Leibniz' famous 'petites perceptions' are neither conscious to the subject nor do they provide the subject with consciousness of external objects.

Early modern philosophers also present different answers to the second question. According to Thiel, authors such as Cudworth claimed that mental-state-consciousness occurs independently from self-consciousness. This, Thiel explains, is denied by Locke and Leibniz among others.

In categorizing early modern answers to the third question, Thiel takes into account the contemporary distinction between first-order and higher-order theories of consciousness. As Thiel sees things, authors such as Descartes, Cudworth, Sergeant, Lee, Leibniz, and Charles Mein held higher-order accounts, whereas some Cartesians like Dilly, La Forge, and Arnauld, as well as non-Cartesians such as Locke favored first-order accounts of consciousness.

In the introductory chapter, Thiel traces the roots of the early modern notion of personhood. The person was considered as a role, as we find in the work of Cicero. Boethius gives pride of place to the notion of person as a rational substance. Both notions hold importance in early modern times, though the Boethian notion is more prominent.

As Thiel emphasizes, questions of identity through time and in particular the question of personal identity took center stage in early modern philosophy. Ancient and medieval philosophy, by contrast, focused on questions of individuation rather than of identity (23–4). The central figure in the early modern debate on personal identity is John Locke. His conception of personal identity involves two innovations: First, Locke gives the whole debate a 'subjectivist' or 'epistemic' twist, in that he approaches this question by examining *our* notions of persons and personal identity (25 and 102–6). Second, he considers consciousness as central to personal identity.

In presenting Locke's view on personal identity, Thiel engages in scholarly debate. He rejects the view that Locke would have grasped personal identity either in terms of continuity of consciousness or in terms of memory. Instead, he argues, Locke took both continuity of consciousness and memory to be essential to the question of personal identity (121–6). In chapter 6, Thiel gives a detailed presentation of two important strands within the early modern debate regarding Locke's account of personal identity. These strands are concerned with the famous

circularity and transitivity objections to Locke's account, both of which were discussed in a lively manner in the 18th century. Thiel concludes that Locke can be defended against the early modern versions of the circularity objection, since all of these rest on misinterpretations of Locke's position. Thiel is more pessimistic about the prospect of refuting the transitivity objection, despite recent attempts (proposed by Jolley, Yaffe, Winkler, Garrett, and others) to defend Locke against it.

Thiel also takes an interesting view on the Humean account of personal identity. The traditional interpretation says that Hume holds a bundle view of the self: the self consists of a bundle of perceptions and, since the bundle is in constant change, personal identity is an illusion. Nevertheless, we possess a natural propensity to believe in personal identity, even though this belief is misguided. In recent years, the traditional interpretation of Hume's bundle view has been challenged by Galen Strawson's 'realist' account. According to Strawson, Hume believes in the existence of a perceiving subject as bearer of perceptions. Moreover, according to Strawson, the perceiving subject is even accessible in inner experience. Thiel thinks that Strawson is right in rejecting the traditional interpretation. But he also believes that Strawson goes too far. In Thiel's view, Hume thinks that we are committed to agnosticism about the nature of the self. Hence, Hume's bundle view must not be interpreted as an ontological claim about the nature of the self. Instead, it is an epistemological claim about what is accessible in inner experience. Since we have no access to the nature of the perceiving subject through inner experience, all that appears in inner experience are bundles of perceptions (418–22).

Thiel's book is clearly written and accessible to more than just a circle of specialists. Its main virtue is the systematized presentation of an amazing range of authors. Thiel achieves important steps towards a complete overview of early modern debates on consciousness and personal identity. Naturally, this achievement comes at a cost. Thiel's discussion of the positions presented does not go as deep as one often wishes it to go. Moreover, in cases where Thiel provides profound discussion, his conclusions are not always convincing.

Thiel points out that Descartes' account of consciousness is not easy to pin down. Eventually he chooses to attribute a higher-order account to Descartes (43–8). This comes as a surprise because it implies an attribution of a highly problematic position to Descartes. As Thiel recognizes, higher-order accounts of consciousness, when combined with the Cartesian claim that all mental states are conscious, are in danger of prompting a vicious infinite regress of higher-order acts. Since the vicious regress is apparent, it hardly seems plausible to claim that Descartes would have missed it. Furthermore, Locke's case is similar to Descartes'. Again, Thiel acknowledges that his conception of consciousness is hard to determine. Since Locke subscribes to Descartes' doctrine of all thoughts being conscious, Locke is in danger of running into the vicious regress as well. Surprisingly, in Locke's case, Thiel argues in favor of a more charitable first-order reading, precisely because it would save Locke from the vicious regress (114). By parity of reasoning the same conclusion should be applied to Descartes. Furthermore, as many Descartes scholars have argued (and Thiel is aware of this), there is strong evidence for a first-order account or some hybrid account of consciousness (proposed by Lähteenmäki and Barth; for Thiel's critique see 48, n. 68), in Descartes that would prevent the regress problem.

These critical remarks, however, are not meant to diminish the value of Thiel's book as a tremendously rich source on early modern debates regarding consciousness and personal identity. This book is the first pick for everyone who wants to gain insight into the abundance of early modern discussions of these topics.

Christian Barth
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin