

RAFFAELLA SANTI

The Invention of Self in Locke and Hobbes

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO show that John Locke and Thomas Hobbes “invented” the *self*, in the sense that they were the first to elaborate the notions of *personal* and *social self*.

It may seem strange to say that Locke coined the notion of *personal self* and one might object that the idea of the *self* had been investigated by previous thinkers, such as Descartes with his *Cogito* and his famous assertion *Cogito, ergo sum*, and Montaigne, who raised the crucial question *Que sais-je?* (What do I know?) which leads to another question, *Que suis-je?* (What am I?). Human interiority had been considered by even more ancient thinkers, such as Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*, the Roman philosopher Seneca throughout his works, Aristotle in *De Anima* and Plato, whose *Republic* is also a conversation on the human *psyche*, and before them, Socrates, with his famous imperative “know thyself.” Yet, these thinkers did not conceive interiority as Locke did, namely as a self-knowing self which is conscious of itself and of its self-consciousness.¹

It was the Irish thinker William Molyneux,² the author of the influential treatise *Dioptrica Nova* (1692) and founder of the Dublin Philosophical Society, who persuaded Locke to make some important changes in the second book of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.³ In addition

¹ In Descartes’ *Meditations*, “the Latin *sibi consciere, sibi conscius esse*, and the noun *conscientia* ... do not mean being conscious of the self, but being informed, notified of something; it is a form of judgement [not a form of self-reflection].” Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oublié* (Paris: Seuil, 2000) section on John Locke, 123–31 (my translation).

² See John Gerald Simms, *William Molyneux of Dublin, 1656–1698* (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1982) and the entry by Patrick Kelly in the *Dictionary of Irish Philosophers*, ed. Thomas Duddy (Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004) 238–40.

³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; repr. 1979), based on the 1700 (4th) edition. References to Locke’s writings in parentheses below are to this edition.

to the inclusion of the famous "Molyneux problem," which appears in the chapter on Perception, he also persuaded Locke to extend the chapter on Power, as well as to add a new section entitled "Of Identity and Diversity" (chapter XXVII), which, for the most part, is dedicated to the issue of personal identity and presents a theory that would be very influential for future thinkers who investigated this topic.⁴

A first reference to personal identity appears in the first chapter of the second book of the *Essay*. It is well known that Locke thought that our *Understanding* operates and acquires knowledge through ideas, which are not innate, but are gained through experience. The first four paragraphs of this chapter explain that experience is not gained only through the observation of external objects through *Sensation*. Locke also refers to "the internal Operations of our Minds, perceived and reflected on by our selves" (II, I, 2). He lists perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing. These are the objects of *Reflection*, which—he writes—might properly be called "internal Sense" (II, I, 4). He later explains that these mental operations, on which we reflect, proceed from the mind's "Powers intrinsical and proper" (II, I, 24). Therefore, *Sensation* and *Reflection* are the only sources of ideas, and ideas—as he will later assert—are "the only immediate object" of the mind, "in all its thoughts and reasonings" (IV, I, 1). In paragraphs 10 to 12 he turns to the issue of personal identity. He now refers to the mind as "soul," and says that "the soul thinks not always" (I, I, 10), for example when a man is asleep. And even if the "soul" thinks when a man is asleep, if upon awakening, the man is not "conscious" of this, those thoughts are not actually his. Therefore, "the sleeping and waking man are two persons" (II, I, 12), "for if we take wholly away all Consciousness of our Actions and Sensations, especially of Pleasure and Pain, and the concernment that accompanies it, it will be hard to know wherein to place personal identity" (II, I, 11).

In paragraph 9 of chapter XXVII Locke examines *personal identity* more closely. Here, he defines a person as "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places." A person is therefore a rational being, aware of his own psychical identity evolving through time. This sense of awareness is made possible "only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking and essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive." He goes on to explain that "when we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we

⁴ See the anthology *Personal Identity*, ed. John Perry (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975).

do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this every one is to himself that which he calls *self*." *Personal identity* is thus "the sameness of a rational being," and "as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done" (II, XXVII, 9).

It is clear that for Locke *personal identity*, or *self* (he tends to equate personhood and selfhood⁵) extends as far as memory extends—memory in terms of remembering of past thoughts and actions, consciously thought and executed—and, in a certain sense, *personal identity* coincides with memory, since absence of memory means absence of identity. If I remember my past actions and thoughts, I am the same person that I was yesterday; it is this consciousness that I am that thinking and acting being, that makes me the person I am. As Locke reiterates in the titles of paragraphs 10, 16 and 17, "consciousness makes personal identity," it "makes the same person," since "self depends on consciousness" and, more precisely,

Self is that conscious thinking thing, (whatever substance made up of, whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not) which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends." (II, XXVII, 17)

Self exists thanks to its own consciousness, since it is "determined by ... identity of consciousness" (II, XXVII, 23). Consciousness is clearly given the fundamental task of granting, and preserving, the uniqueness of the individual. As Giovanni Jervis has pointed out:

Locke considers consciousness in terms of awareness as being paradigmatic of the person; the person is such because, being capable of reflection, i.e. of responsible attention towards itself, it becomes conscious of the fact of being conscious. This human awareness has two aspects which are inseparable (or which are only artificially separable): on the one hand, it is self consciousness, that is consciousness of the self or of the person, as a global object represented in the field of consciousness; on the other hand, it is consciousness of the lucid consciousness of the objects external to the person.⁶

⁵ See Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self. Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 97–98. A different opinion is expressed in Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000) 20–21.

⁶ Giovanni Jervis, *Presenza e identità* (Milan: Garzanti, 1992) 151 (my translation). The notion of consciousness as "the only" element which forms the person has been challenged, and above all by the theory of psychoanalysis with the discovery of the unconscious.

It must be added that, for Locke, the concept of personal identity involves the notion of responsibility, of people being responsible of their own actions. He writes that “person”—which is the self’s “name”—“is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and happiness, and misery” (II, X–VII, 26). Thus, “in personal identity is founded all the right of reward or punishment” (II, XXVII, 18). As Charles Taylor emphasizes, the notion of *self* is connected to “the moral self-understanding” and “Locke’s person is the moral agent who takes responsibility for his acts in the light of future retribution.”⁷

The moral (and legal) dimension of personal identity is even more accentuated in Hobbes’s thought. Hobbes’s interest, however, unlike Locke’s, is not personal identity as such; for Hobbes, personal identity is linked to the political theory he constructs in his writings.⁸ The analysis of the concept of *persona*, carried out in Hobbes’s political writings (and especially in chapter XVI of *Leviathan*⁹) is instrumental to the understanding of the role played by men—“natural persons”—in the process of creating the state or—in Hobbes’s favourite expression—the *commonwealth*. The aim is to show the nature of the process as well as that of its product (the sovereign) as “the artificial person” of the state, or *persona civilis*) with all of the relative consequences—first of all the rights and duties of sovereign, and then those of the subjects (XVIII–XXI). In order to explain the origin and nature of political communities, Hobbes “invented” the *social self* by considering the projection of the individual self into a social dimension.

Here also, there may be some objections—although in the opposite sense of those in the case of Locke—since it is usually recognized that only subsequent thinkers would consider the social dimension of self, and that this notion is no older than the works produced during the European Enlightenment—such as Vico’s *La scienza nuova* (1725), Montesquieu’s *L’esprit des lois* (1748), Rousseau’s *Le contract social* (1762), and Ferguson’s

⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 173. In *De obligatione conscientiae* (1660), Sanderson had seen that “conscience concerned *Actus particulares Proprii* ... Locke’s modification was to emphasise consciousness rather than conscience”: Ian Harris, *The Mind of John Locke: A Study of Political Theory in its Intellectual Setting* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994; rev. ed. 1998) 303.

⁸ Hobbes does, however, briefly discuss personal identity in a non-political context in *Elementorum philosophiae sectio prima De corpore* 1655 (trans. *Elements of Philosophy Concerning Body*) XI, 7.

⁹ Quotations by Hobbes with references in parentheses are all from *Leviathan*, ed. Aloysius P. Martinich (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002)—based on the 1651 (“head”) edition.

An Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767)—to quote just a few. I will try to show that the “inventor” of social self instead was Hobbes.¹⁰

The point of departure is human “interiority.” Hobbes’ social self is, in fact, the product of the awareness of equality in human nature, which allows us to perceive the emotional and rational nature of others, and to predict their behaviour, through personal introspection.

In the Introduction to the English *Leviathan* published in 1651 (a Latin version will appear in 1668), Hobbes asserts that there is a saying by which men “might learn truly to read one another, if they would take the pains; and that is *nosce teipsum, read thyself*, which was ... meant ... to teach us that for the similitude of the thoughts and passions ... whosoever looketh into himself ... shall thereby read and know what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon the like occasions” (Introduction, 3; the famous statement: “He that is to govern a whole nation must read in himself, not this or that particular man, but mankind” is in paragraph 4).

This because “Nature hath made men equal in the faculties of body and mind” (XIII, 1). By “reading” themselves and also by observing the behaviour of others they become aware of this ontological equality. Self knowledge is required in order to understand others, and the idea “know yourself in order to know others” holds true in this case. Consequently, in Hobbes’s argument, to be able to decide to create a state, men must be aware of their own nature as well as of the nature of others, and must be able to imagine the consequences of their actions: either by stipulating a mutual contract which gives birth to a state which protects them, or by remaining in “the natural condition” of war of all against all, caused by equality of abilities and by subsequent mutual diffidence (XIII, 3–8). Reason suggests that they choose the first option and, once the state is born, Hobbes considers citizens to be aware of their rights and duties, as established by the law. These limitations of individual freedom then become part of the person’s concept of self; to use a modern, post-Hobbes expression, they become a relevant part of their *social identity*, conveying the distinctive character of their “commonwealth” in words, gestures and practice.

Let us consider Hobbes’s concept of *persona* more closely. As already mentioned, Hobbes examined this concept in order to explain the process of creating the commonwealth or state. This process involves the key notions

¹⁰ The origins of this topic are to be found in Plato’s *Republic*, in the city-soul analogy. I have argued elsewhere that Plato’s *Republic* and *The Laws* may have served as models for *Leviathan* (as Hobbes himself seems to suggest in XXXI, 41); see my Introduction in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviatano*, Italian translation with English and Latin texts (Milan: Bompiani, 2001) VII–XL.

of representation and authorization. In Chapter XVI of *Leviathan* entitled "Of persons, authors, and things personated" Hobbes defines a person as "He whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of another man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether truly or by fiction. When they are considered as his own, then is he called a *natural person*; and when they are considered as representing the words and actions of another, then is he a *feigned* or *artificial person*" (XVI, 102).¹¹ The sovereign is an artificial person who *represents* the citizens inasmuch as he impersonates them—or "bears their persons"—acting on their behalf, as explained in paragraph 3. And, in the subsequent paragraph he writes that "of persons artificial, some have their words and actions *owned* by those whom they represent. And then the person is the *actor*; and he that owneth his words and actions is the *AUTHOR*, in which case the actor acteth by authority" the latter being "the right of doing any action" (XVI, 4). In Hobbes's political theory, the sovereign is the "actor" and the citizens are the "authors" of his/its actions (the sovereign may be either a king or a sovereign assembly). He/it represents them, and unites them, as illustrated by the engraved title page of *Leviathan's Head Edition*,¹² where the citizens are visually depicted in the body of the sovereign, who physically (and metaphorically) embodies them making of their wills one common *Will* ("A multitude of men are made *one person* when they are by one man, or one person, represented, so that it be done with the consent of every one of that multitude in particular. For it is the *unity* of the representer, not the *unity* of the represented, that maketh the person *one*. And it is the representer that beareth the person, and but one person; and *unity*, cannot otherwise be understood in multitude" (XVI, 13).

This engraving gives the reader a glimpse of Hobbes's political theory: the *commonwealth* unites the citizens in the sovereign who represents them or, in other words, the sovereign is the unity of all citizens in so far as he represents them as the person of the state. He is the *civil person*, authorized with the total sovereign power ecclesiastical as well as civil (symbolized by the crosier and sword)¹³ the origin of which is not divine but entirely hu-

¹¹ See Quentin Skinner, "Hobbes and the Purely Artificial Person of the State," in *Visions of Politics. Vol. III: Hobbes and Civil Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 177–208—where later developments in the Latin version of *Leviathan* and in the last chapter of *De homine* are taken into account.

¹² See Noel Malcolm, "The Title Page of *Leviathan*, Seen in a Curious Perspective," in *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 200–33.

¹³ See Aloysius P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 363.

man, being legitimized through the logic of authorization. It is to be noted that in the *Head Edition's* engraved title page, the backs of the subjects are represented in the body and arms of the sovereign—who “embodies” and “impersonates” them, making them *one* political community whereas in the manuscript copy, presented to Charles II in Paris in the same year, the backs of the subjects are replaced by their faces turned towards the reader who, in this case, is Charles II himself. Hobbes must have attributed a specific meaning to these images. In the first case, the message is for common readers (the citizens), who must feel “transported” into the sovereign’s body and absorbed by it, through a process of “embodiment”; in the second case the message is for the sovereign (the king), who sees the subjects’ faces turned to the exterior and looking at him, as if to remind him that he has assumed all their strength and must use it to protect them.

Leviathan is Hobbes’s most famous work, and contains the most complete and definitive version of Hobbes’s political philosophy. However, it must be remembered that many of the themes developed throughout this work had already been outlined by Hobbes in his previous political writings, namely *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, circulated in manuscript copies in 1640, and *De cive*, the first edition of which appeared in 1642, and the second revised edition appeared in 1647 (he then republished the work in 1668, together with the other two sections of the *Elementa philosophiae*—*De corpore* and *De homine*—in his *opera omnia* in Latin). Hobbes’s friend (and secretary during the period he spent in Paris, 1640–1651), Samuel Sorbière, produced a French translation of the second edition of *De cive*, read and approved by Hobbes himself, and published in 1649, two years before *Leviathan* was published. My thesis is that the influence of Sorbière’s free translation of chapter V, paragraph 9, is evident in the engraving on the title page of *Leviathan*. This emerges from a comparison between the following passages: “A Union so made is called a *commonwealth* [*civitas*] or *civil society* [*societas civilis*] and also a *civil person* [*persona civilis*]; for since there is *one will* of all of them, it is to be taken as *one person*; and is to be distinguished and differentiated by a *unique* name from all particular men, having its own rights and its own property [*res sibi proprias*]¹⁴ (this modern English translation perfectly renders the original Latin text). Now, compare this text with Sorbière’s translation: “L’union qui se fait de cette sorte, forme le corps d’un État, d’une Société, et pour le dire ainsi, d’une *personne civile*; car les volontés de tous les membres de la république n’en

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) V, 9.

formant qu'une seule, l'État peut être considéré comme si ce n'était qu'une seule tête; aussi a-t-on coutume de lui donner un nom propre, et de séparer ses intérêts de ceux des particuliers."¹⁵

The engraving on the title page of *Leviathan* can be traced to the phrase "the body of the state" in Sorbière's translation—this actually also appears in the *Elements* (the second part of which is entitled *De Corpore Politico*) and seems to have been well established by the times of Hobbes (he writes: "This union so made, is that which man call now-a-days¹⁶ a BODY POLITIC or civil society; and the Greeks call *polis*, that is to say, a city; which may be defined to be a multitude of men, united as one person by a common power, for their common peace, defence, and benefit"¹⁷)—and above all to the phrase "a unique head"—which only appears in the French text.

And so, as I have tried to show, Locke and Hobbes were the "inventors" of the notion of self in its personal and social dimensions: *self* conscious of itself and of its self consciousness, and *self* which identifies itself in the context of a civil society or community.

¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Le citoyen ou les fondements de la politique*, French trans. Samuel Sorbière, ed. Simone Goyard-Fabre (Flammarion: Paris, 1982) V, 9 (my underscoring).

¹⁶ Arrigo Pacchi refers as an example to *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique* by Edward Forset (1606). See his note in Thomas Hobbes, *Elementi di legge naturale e politica*, ed. Pacchi (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1968; repr. 1989) 160, note 1.

¹⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, ed. John C.A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) XIX, 8 (compare *Leviathan*, Introduction, 1).