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The idea of philosophical development

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Abstract: This paper takes Udo Thiel's *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* as an example of a study that aims to provide an account of a particular philosophical development, and discusses both the methodological requirements and the philosophical commitments connected with this ambition. In a first step, I distinguish between two fundamentally different ways of thinking about philosophical development, viz. *externalism* and *internalism* with regard to historical developments in philosophy, and I consider two ways of defining the two respective positions. Next, I specify certain methodological decisions that are relevant when writing a study on a particular philosophical development, and I characterize Udo Thiel's book with respect to them. While no definitive position is taken with regard to the issues raised, the paper does advocate a reflective approach to them.

Keywords: development, philosophical; progress, philosophical; context, contextualism; externalism/internalism

Udo Thiel's book is an extensive study of a discussion that spanned more than a century on two core issues related to the concept of the human subject, i. e. consciousness or self-consciousness and personal identity through time. Aiming to account for the development of philosophical discussions about these issues in early modern philosophy, Thiel examines a very broad range of primary sources and a great amount of secondary literature. More than other books covering such large time periods, Thiel's study also engages with interpretive controversies.¹ Considering this impressive amount of material, I have decided to focus on some methodological issues in this review. Before addressing them, I would like to make a few remarks about the status of my concerns.

There are many different ways to do good research in the history of philosophy, and most are valuable in some way or another. There are therefore many decisions to be made when one writes a book. However, it seems to me, these

¹ See also Marleen Rozemond's review in the *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* from 2012.

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decisions are rarely taken in full awareness. This is often simply the result of serious engagement with the object of a study. If we are guided, as historians of philosophy, by the material we examine, it may happen that we arrive at quite unexpected points. Not only may we be confronted with findings that differ from those we'd hoped for, but, possibly, we may even be forced to adopt another perspective on the issue at stake. Things may develop in a surprising manner, such that it would be wrongheaded to require complete methodological transparency beforehand. But it is another thing to make up one's mind about the principles implicitly driving a book one reads. The methodological questions I am raising here are primarily meant to clarify my own reading.

My overall concern is the methodological commitments involved in Thiel's declared goal of accounting for some *development*. I will raise three questions related to this notion. Even though he is quite explicit at some points, it is not obvious how Thiel would have answered all these questions. It might thus be the case that in discussing the notion of philosophical development I ascribe a position to him that differs from the one he would have adopted. Still, thinking about Thiel's views on these issues is important for gaining a firm grasp of his project. For it seems to me that both the numerous merits and some of the more problematic aspects of Thiel's exposition essentially depend on them.

In his book, Thiel pursues a twofold aim. First, he wants "to provide an account of the development" of the topics of consciousness or self-consciousness and personal identity in the early modern period. Second, he wants to do this by explaining "the philosophical arguments in their historical context" (p. 3). Given the length of the period considered, this is an ambitious but not unreasonable goal. In my reading of the book, however, I was not quite sure about Thiel's own understanding of this aim. In particular, Thiel never discusses what he means by "development".

There is an unproblematic usage of this term. Obviously, when dealing with a certain period in the history of philosophy, one needs to have a certain understanding of what was going on in it. 'Development' may be used as a dummy term to denote the sum of changes and continuities in philosophical discussion about a topic during a considered time span.

The question arises whether this is a strong enough conception of development to serve as a program for a philosophical study. Why do we have to know what was going on in the discussion of consciousness and personal identity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries rather than, let's say, the seventh and eighth? Thiel's answer to this question is clear. He points out, first, that "interest in the issues of self-consciousness and personal identity is certainly characteristic and even central to early modern thought" (p. 1). Second, and more important for our concern, he claims that "this is an interest that continues to

this day, in a form still strongly influenced by the conceptual frameworks of early modern thought on these issues” (p. 1). The early modern period, he thus contends, is crucial for the way in which we understand these issues today. This indicates that Thiel thinks of the development he is depicting in a determinate way.

To elaborate on this in more detail, I shall discuss Thiel’s approach by means of the following three sets of questions.

- a) First and foremost, the question arises what is it that we are after when we investigate a “philosophical development”? Are we looking for some *philosophical progress* specified by some inherent goal? Or do we allege that some change amounting in a particular outcome is the result of external forces? Are we interested in historical or in a theoretical and conceptual development? Or do we think of an intellectual development in which historical and theoretical aspects are narrowly intertwined?

At this point, it might be helpful to introduce some terminology I have encountered in Denmark in informal conversation. In analogy with several debates in analytic philosophy, we used to distinguish between two positions that we called internalism and externalism with regard to historical developments in philosophy. How can we define these notions? There are two options. On the one hand, we can say that these terms just mark two opposite ideal-typical positions that are rarely realized in their pure forms. On the other hand, one can define them more strictly by stipulating that any historical explanation that sometimes accounts for a philosophical development in terms of conceptual or theoretical advancement follows internalism, whereas only approaches which *always prioritize* historicist explanations or *exclusively* allow for external causes constitute the externalist camp. Yet, unlike in epistemological discussions, these terms are used in the history of philosophy to clarify one’s methodological principles rather than to describe two distinguished theoretical views. They delineate our approaches and do not determine what constitutes a philosophical development. I therefore prefer to think of these terms as denoting ideal types of some sort; it goes without saying that most historians of philosophy practice a mixture of internalism and externalism. Finally, I would like to emphasize that my view is not that as a historian of philosophy one has to opt for one position once and for all, but I do think it is important to reflect upon this issue when one is out to examine a certain development.

My interpretive question is thus the following: Is Thiel an externalist or an internalist with regard to the development of the issues of (self-)consciousness and personal identity?

- b) A second set of questions relates to the issue of *the definition of the time period* to be considered in order to account for a particular development.

When does a development start, and when does it end? What are the features we take to play the definitional role here? Philosophical claims? Terminological shifts? The rise of new thinkers? The publication and reception of key texts? The establishment of new scientific institutions? Political or historic events? Further, how do we define the crucial steps of a development? Are they simply to be identified with the positions we ascribe to particular figures?

Again, these considerations are connected with a concrete interpretive question I have with regard to Thiel's approach: How necessary, I wonder, given the issues he addresses, is his focus on the development from Descartes to Hume and, in particular, the culmination in Locke?

- c) There is, finally, a third set of questions regarding the *thematic unity* of philosophical developments. What are the criteria on the basis of which we take historical discussion on certain concepts to constitute one development rather than two or more? How can we decide which issues addressed under a certain title are intrinsically related to it and which, on the other hand, are only connected to it in virtue of some historical coincidence?

In other words: Is Thiel's focus on the issues of consciousness and personal identity when examining the development of the early modern subject philosophically motivated, and if so how?

In providing an account of the development of the early modern subject, Thiel must have a view on all of these methodological issues, even though he does not answer the above questions explicitly. In what follows, therefore, I will try to identify his position by looking at the way in which he deals with some crucial issues.

Ad a). Regarding the first set of questions, one is tempted at first to think of Thiel's approach as "externalist". This is at least what he seems to indicate when declaring that he wants "to explain the philosophical arguments in their historical context" (p.3). On a closer look, however, things change. When talking about contexts, Thiel always and exclusively focuses on philosophical or related theological debates. He looks neither at political, nor at social contexts. Nor does he consider the development in other fields, such as the medical sciences or physiology. If Thiel were committed to externalism, we would have to take this as a historical statement. We would then have to ascribe to Thiel the (negative) claim that the debate was mostly or even solely driven by the dispute between philosophers and theologians, or theologically motivated philosophers. I cannot discuss here whether or not this is true. But let me point out that to the extent this is true we have to assume a fundamental difference between the discussion of these issues in early modern thought and the discussion of the same issues in contemporary

philosophy of mind. In twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy, the issue of consciousness is mainly debated against the backdrop of the ambitions of the neurosciences or, more generally, the cognitive sciences. The picture provided by Thiel's study, in contrast, suggests that it was the theological concern of punishment and reward in the afterlife which was driving the debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

There is a second reason why, the emphasis on contexts notwithstanding, I took Thiel's study to be internalist rather than externalist in spirit. Looking at his treatment of Locke, which is based, I think, on an excellent, illuminating, and original analysis of Locke's position, Thiel is, it seems to me, both making a *historical* claim and affirming a widespread *philosophical* tenet. The historical claim, which he more or less explicitly states, is this: There are views in early modern philosophy that essentially rely on the notion that there must be some pre-reflective way of being conscious of oneself and one's mental states. Contrary to what was alleged by the so-called Heidelberg School, early modern philosophers did not account for self-consciousness across the board by proposing a 'reflection theory' (p. 16). There were, Thiel states, same-order accounts as early as the seventeenth century, and not only, as claimed by Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank, at the end of the eighteenth century. I largely agree with this historical claim.

Somewhat surprisingly however, Thiel's critique of the historical account of the Heidelberg School is connected with a move which strikes me as itself coming close to the accounts of the Heidelberg School. Thiel's reading of Locke attributes an account to the latter which is committed to the very same systematic priority of same-order accounts over higher-order accounts as that defended by the proponents of the Heidelberg School. That's the philosophical tenet underlying Thiel's study.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with this. Obviously, that one makes use of a certain contemporary account in reconstructing a historical position does not preclude one's also advocating that account. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that Thiel makes a strong case for a reading of Locke that ascribes to Locke a view which does not fall prey to the fallacies usually associated with higher-order theories. Problems may arise, however, since we are dealing with a historical *debate*. It is rather difficult, I think, to do justice to all parties partaking in a debate when one prioritizes one contemporary model. This is not what Thiel does; yet he does something quite similar: He considers Locke, or rather the Locke he defends against the charges by the Heidelberg School, as a paradigm which is used not only to identify forerunners and allies, but also to judge the critics of Locke's account. I must confess, I sometimes thought that a stronger case for those critics could be made if one were to identify the point of their concerns by analyzing them in terms of some other contemporary approach, instead of asking

whether they do justice to the conception Thiel ascribes to Locke. I presume, for instance, that some of the metaphysical arguments against Locke's view on the subjective constitution of personal identity would turn out to be stronger than Thiel suggests, if they were analyzed in terms of Peter F. Strawson's views on the concept of persons rather than in terms of Locke's account.²

Ad b). I come now to the second set of questions relating to the *definition of the time period* considered in Thiel's account of the early modern subject. It seems clear that, generally speaking, externalists with regard to the history of philosophy are in a better position to answer these questions, for they can simply focus on historical cornerstones. They can, as it were, adopt a positivistic attitude according to which one simply has to rely on certain historical facts.

The case is more delicate if one is committed to internalism. Many historical facts do not matter to our understanding of the internal logic of a development. Certainly, insofar as the beginning and the end of some development is concerned, we may always adopt a pragmatic attitude. We may just begin with a position we take to constitute a promising starting point, and end after we have made our point. That is, it seems to me, the approach of Thiel's book, which starts with Descartes, ends with Hume, and is complemented by some prehistory in the beginning and with a brief outlook in the end. Considering the particular steps of a given development, such a pragmatic approach is more prone to undeclared neglect of certain less regarded aspects. The danger of a pragmatic stance consists, in other words, in the replication of our ignorance.

At this point, it has to be mentioned that generally speaking Thiel is more than safe from this objection. He deals with a huge amount of thinkers and debates which are usually considered marginal and which are unknown to many historians of early modern philosophy. Furthermore, when he engages in discussing the approaches of the big figures, he often provides a fresh view on them and does not simply adhere to common sense. This is true of his discussions of Descartes, Locke, and Hume. The chapters on these thinkers are all insightful and a great pleasure to read. This more than compensates for the fact that in his discussion of some other figures, Thiel largely repeats the standard view. One cannot expect a book to deal with everything in a new and original manner.

² I had this idea in particular when I read Thiel's discussion of Isaac Watt's critique of Locke. To be sure, one cannot analyze his hypothesis of staminal particles in terms of Peter Strawson. But both the critique that Locke's man-person distinction does not correspond to the nature of things and the point that a person must be identifiable by others can be argued for in terms of Strawson's descriptive metaphysics.

Nevertheless, there is a danger in this pragmatic approach, of which we have to be aware when we are dealing with philosophical developments from an internalist perspective. We tend to support the obvious, and neglect the hidden. To make my point clearer, I would like to mention one particularity of Thiel's account that has struck me as both philologically right and philosophically problematic. When discussing the issue of consciousness, Thiel exclusively engages with theories if and insofar as they make use of the terms 'consciousness', 'conscience', or 'conscientia'. This may serve as a heuristic device, but we cannot take it as the sole indicator of a thinker's interest in the issue of consciousness in early modern philosophy. As I have recently argued, for instance, Spinoza, in identifying the human mind with the idea of a particular body, presupposes a similar kind of pre-reflexive knowledge to what Thiel finds in Locke's concept of consciousness. Yet, he nowhere uses the word 'conscius' or 'conscientia' in this context.³

Note that my point is not that it was Spinoza rather than Locke who first recognized the importance of pre-reflexive consciousness. I mention this simply to show that the development of ideas does not necessarily correspond to the development of terminology. Thus if one sticks with terminology, one may miss those points where philosophers were still struggling to express themselves in the right manner. Of course, this makes it even harder to identify certain steps within a philosophical development. But to the extent that one is interested in philosophical developments from an internalist perspective, these points may be quite instructive since they may indicate situations where certain conceptual decisions were on the way, but not yet taken.

Ad c). I will address the last question about the *thematic unity* of the development in the early modern period only briefly, and I will do so, primarily, by raising questions that may open up further perspectives on the topic of Thiel's book. In the introduction, he refers to several topics which are all connected to the idea of human subjectivity. Besides self-consciousness and personal identity, he mentions "the mind-body-problem, questions concerning agency, self-determination, moral and legal responsibility, and also the possibility of knowledge of an external world and physical objects" (p.1).

³ See my *Die Erklärbarkeit von Erfahrung. Realismus und Subjektivität in Spinozas Theorie des menschlichen Geistes*, Frankfurt 2010, 189–196. Thiel, on p. 65, cites my book in one place with respect to the passage which deals with Spinoza's usage of 'conscientia', where I argue that this term does not denote consciousness. But he missed my point that what is later referred to as 'consciousness' plays an important role in the individuation of finite minds. In contrast to Thiel, I thus think that some notion consciousness, albeit not the term 'conscientia', performs a constitutive function for the idea of the self of the person in Spinoza's *Ethics*.

In pointing out this whole range of issues, Thiel is obviously aware that he is making a selection here, even though he does not justify it explicitly. He does, however, justify his selection of particular thinkers – Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Wolff, and Hume – in the light of his preference for these two features. There is thus a relation that is assumed to hold between these figures and the features selected as constituting the topic. This makes sense, for in all those figures there is a connection between the two issues. The question remains: why the preference for these two features? Why not write a history that focuses on another set of features and puts other, less known, philosophers in the foreground? Why not examine, for instance, the connection between self-consciousness and agency? To provide an interesting account that centers on this connection, one would probably have to think of other thinkers. One would not necessarily have to discuss Descartes or Hume, but it would possibly be illuminating to examine the conceptual foundations of the Moralists, which are addressed, in Thiel's book, in the space of less than a single page. To be sure, one might not encounter a great deal regarding the metaphysics of personal identity by reading, for instance, La Rochefoucauld, but one would probably gain a better understanding of the moral constitution of the self. This, in turn, might help to defend Locke against those of his critics who just could not see the point of his distinguishing between 'person', 'man' and 'soul'.

Looking at contemporary discussions, on the other hand, one might wonder whether what Thiel, together with the early moderns, refer to as consciousness or self-consciousness is really one singular feature. It strikes me that Thiel examines two different issues under this title, namely, self-knowledge and self-reference, or, in other words, the awareness of our mental life as contained in our first-personal knowledge of our own mental states and the incorrigible knowledge of our being the subject or maker of our mental states and attitudes. In contemporary philosophy, these are clearly separate issues, although there is of course some interdependence between the ways in which they are discussed. Following Thiel's picture, there seems to be no clear separation between these issues in early modern philosophy. I doubt whether this is really so. Surely, this difference is not always made explicitly, and there were positions that mixed up the two, but there were also philosophers who, under the same notion as others, were just focusing on the one rather than the other issue.

I cannot go into further detail here. Let me close by stating that it was by engaging with these questions that I came to see the impact of Thiel's book. He's not just telling another story of early modern philosophy of mind, but is engaging in a close examination of how certain issues related to the conceptualization of the human mind in early modern philosophy became what they are now regarded as being: key philosophical issues in their own right. Further, he is making a case

for the view that same-order accounts of consciousness were already present in early modern philosophy and did not simply arise, as is sometimes assumed, with German idealism or the phenomenological tradition. Thus even if there is not one clear-cut topic called “the early modern subject”, Thiel’s study lays the ground for interesting philosophical research on issues associated with this label.

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