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Course

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Locke's and Hume's Theories of Personhood:

Similarities and Differences

In this paper I will deal with the theories of personhood formulated by such influential thinkers of Early Modern time as John Locke (1632-1704) and David Hume (1711-1776), defining similarities and divergences in the views of these philosophers. It will be argued that, although Hume and Locke followed substantially different philosophical approaches towards personhood, their rejection of traditional theological conceptions of personhood was a major advance in the philosophy of mind.

LOCKE'S VIEWS ON PERSONHOOD

Locke's empiricist philosophy led him to describe human senses as the sole proof of the existence of objective reality (Spellman 41). Accordingly, Locke argued that the consciousness of the subject depends on combination of his/her self-consciousness with the sense of physical location with regard to other bodies and the recognition of the self-consciousness of the human

subject by other humans (Yaffe 212-214). He claimed that the existence of 'the person', as an identity of the human subject, is dependent upon the continuity of unitary consciousness, which is provided by uninterrupted thought, rather than by the immaterial substance of immortal soul as such (Spellman 64).

Locke laid special emphasis on memory as the instrument that unites temporally different sensations in one complex of mental perceptions, providing for unity of personal identity (Yaffe 214). He thought that the mental act of distinguishing between internal or external world is the most convincing argument for self-consciousness of the person (Yaffe 214). Nevertheless, he did not think that the acts of awareness of the person amounts to a singular personal awareness (Yaffe 215), which to a certain extent resembles the comparable ideas of Hume

HUMEAN PERSPECTIVE ON PERSONHOOD

Hume's views on the personhood were intrinsically connected with his polemic both against traditional theism and rationalist empiricism. Hume explicitly denied the divine character of human reason, going much further than Locke in this regard.

Somewhat similarly to Locke, Hume distinguishes between human being and human person, defining the former as the unity of body and mind,

while the latter is equated with the mind, or soul, itself (Riukas). He described the person as a bundle of perceptions (Biro 55), comprising both natural and social reality, claiming that it is impossible to arrive at authentic concept of personhood, as one cannot isolate the human person from his/her subjective sensations (Riukas).

Hume rejected the idea of a person as an independent possessor of his/her perceptions. Accordingly, the idea of unitary consciousness as a true manifestation of human self, expressed by Locke, was alien to Hume, as the latter clearly claimed that the very notion of unchanging human mind was a 'fictitious' one (Biro 42).

CONCLUSION

As one can see, the different philosophical traditions espoused by Hume and Locke greatly influenced their conceptions of personhood. While Locke, a rationalist theist, thought that the person possesses unitary consciousness that could be understood as a singular set of phenomena, Hume considered the idea of unitary human mind a fiction, asserting instead that the personal consciousness is nothing but a dynamic complex of sensations and perceptions and that there might exist multiple identities in one human subject.

Nevertheless, both Locke and Hume subscribed to the notion of social determination of the personhood, albeit in different way, and viewed human

consciousness as connected with bodily sensations. In that way, both of them explicitly or implicitly opposed the orthodox concepts of personhood as immaterial substance, laying the foundations for modern secular understanding of the personhood.

Works Cited

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