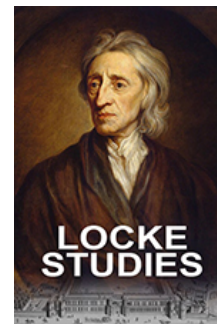


## Locke Studies

# Locke on Persons and Personal Identity by Ruth Boeker

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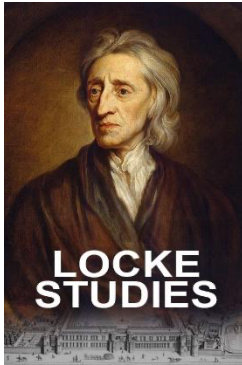
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## ***Review of Locke on Persons and Personal Identity by Ruth Boeker***

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*Abstract:*

A review of Ruth Boeker's recent book *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

*Keywords:* Locke, personal identity, agency, personhood

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**Ruth Boeker. *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 336 pp. £78.00 (hbk). ISBN: 9780198846758.**

**Reviewed by JOSHUA HARRY HAYWOOD**

As the title *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity* suggests, Ruth Boeker's interpretation of Locke highlights the significance of Locke's distinction between personhood and personal identity. Locke argues that we need to distinguish the idea of a person from that of a man. For Locke, 'person' is a forensic term, whereas 'personal identity' is grounded in the 'sameness of consciousness.' Boeker points out that we need to go beyond this observation and instead reflect on the interconnected nature of both concepts. Boeker explains how Locke couples a moral and legal account of personhood with a psychological account of personal identity over time. It is argued that when both of these concepts are examined together, personal identity can be understood as consciousness-centric. Boeker interprets sameness of consciousness as being ontologically prior to attributions of moral accountability. It is in virtue of the connection between personhood and responsibility that Boeker claims that the Lockean person is a moral person. Boeker thus moves away from certain neo-Lockean interpretations that typically support a wholly psychological theory of personal identity.

Boeker rightly reminds us that we need to understand Locke's broader background to make sense of his theory of personal identity. As a Christian, it is important for Locke to account for the nature of person in relation to the afterlife, as well as clarify the persistence conditions of a person in such an afterlife. Locke's point is that personal identity does not have to coincide with the identity of man or substance. Locke aims to demonstrate that persons, rather than human beings or substances, can continue to exist after bodily death. Locke's account of personal identity as 'sameness of consciousness' can thus accommodate certain questions of moral accountability, especially in the afterlife, which was of particular importance in the historical context in which Locke wrote.

Boeker emphasises that Locke's defence of a consciousness-based, 'substance neutral' account of personal identity stems from his wider theological and epistemic views. It is argued that Locke's agnostic metaphysical stance on debates concerning the materiality or immateriality of thinking substances gives Locke's account of personal identity extra explanatory power and avoids metaphysical challenges that his predecessors encountered when accounting for the interaction between the mind, the soul and the body.

Boeker's interpretation of the Lockean self seems similar to both Galen Strawson's and more recently, Antonia Lolordo's (Strawson, *Locke on Personal Identity: Consciousness and Concernment*, [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011] and Lolordo, *Locke's Moral Man* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012]). However, Boeker pays particular attention to how Locke's account of personal identity fits into the historical context

of Locke's time. She maintains that Locke's theory helps to answer one of the burning questions of the age, namely, moral accountability in the afterlife, whereas Strawson is more concerned with the question of moral accountability on Earth, or repentance before the afterlife.

By introducing (though not endorsing) the notion of absolute identity, Boeker broadens the debate on how we should interpret Locke's personal identity theory. Boeker interprets Locke's 'kind-dependent approach' as implying that there is no absolute definition of 'person,' but instead, several possibilities. It is argued that Locke's approach to questions of identity is best interpreted as kind-dependent. Moreover, Boeker rejects the relative identity and coincidence interpretations, asserting that they attribute metaphysical positions to Locke that are not well supported by his text and thereby create problematic assumptions that do not arise for the kind-dependent interpretation" (*Locke on Persons and Personal Identity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021], 30).

Boeker states that when we adopt the kind-dependent approach to persons, it becomes clear why we should analyse Locke's account of personhood first and foremost, rather than being fixated on persistence conditions for persons that are usually grounded in substance discussions. Boeker highlights that when we grasp this, we appreciate the explanatory power of Locke's notion of personal identity and how it is not limited by questions of substance. Furthermore, Boeker reminds us that Locke's theory allows the possibility of 'gappy' existence over time, "meaning that a member of a given kind, such as 'A', can exist for a certain period of time, then no longer exist and come back into existence at a later time" (*Ibid.*, 27).

Arguably Boeker's main contribution is highlighting that we need to attempt to understand Locke in the historical and religious context in which he lived. Boeker sets out to show that Locke's personal identity theory cannot be as easily dismissed on the basis of circularity and transitivity objections. Firstly, the objection of transitivity was not widely raised during Locke's lifetime. Secondly, Boeker holds that it is likely that Locke would favour a hybrid account of personal identity that involves both transitive and non-transitive relations grounded in Locke's account of sameness of consciousness. She argues that Locke would likely have been less concerned by the problem of transitivity than his critics claim. Boeker's hybrid interpretation leaves room for repentance and the afterlife, taking into account the religious context of Locke's era. She highlights that Locke's arguments presuppose a conception of morality rooted in divine law and the existence of a divine lawmaker to enforce morality through rewards and punishment.

Furthermore, this book is ideal for students looking for a comprehensive understanding of Locke's analysis of consciousness. Boeker examines the relation between consciousness and reflection, Lockean perception, whether all consciousness is self-consciousness, the relation between memory and consciousness, and how consciousness might extend to the future, if at all. Boeker thinks that for Locke, consciousness is not a higher

order mental state and cannot be identified with reflection. Unlike Weinberg, Boeker believes that consciousness for Locke is not restricted to self-consciousness, but also includes consciousness of the contents of one's perceptions (Ibid., 10). Interestingly, she supports a broader interpretation of the sameness of consciousness that simultaneously endorses elements from traditionally rival interpretations. For example, understanding the sameness of consciousness in terms of memory, appropriation, duration, mineness, togetherness (or unity), and temporality. Boeker thinks such accounts are incomplete on their own, but very insightful and not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Parts of the book, though interesting, seem less relevant for supporting the main thesis that personal identity is sameness of consciousness, which is a necessary condition for both moral and legal accountability. For example, in chapter 11 Boeker explores Shaftesbury's and Hume's responses to Locke's account of personal identity.

Finally, for anyone seeking an in-depth analysis of Locke's philosophy of personal identity, this book is an essential read. It seems as important to understanding Locke's theory of personal identity as Galen Strawson's book *Locke on Personal Identity: Consciousness and Concernment*. It is not necessarily groundbreaking research, but nevertheless interesting and Boeker's writing style is so clear that her text is incredibly useful to help challenge certain assumptions taken for granted in Locke's account of personal identity, pushing the reader to reach their own interpretation.

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