

EXPERIMENTAL SELVES

Person and Experience in Early Modern Europe

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CHRISTOPHER BRAIDER

Experimental Selves

Person and Experience
in Early Modern Europe

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Acknowledgments

This book came out in a rush during a year-long sabbatical following a four-year term in the role of what I came to think of as the Dean Who Wasn't One of the College That Didn't Exist. My task was in fact to oversee the creation of a new College of Media, Communication, and Information here at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and, as you can imagine, it was a bone-crushing and above all time-consuming experience. However, I did manage to keep reading, thinking, and note-taking, so when at last the moment arrived, I was ready to write, and rapturously happy to do so. However, I was left with little chance to share my ideas in the way I prefer to, especially not if the book was to see the light of day anytime soon. The result is that, while there are a number of people to thank, they are not nearly as numerous as they might have been.

Heartfelt thanks are nevertheless due. To Timothy Hampton and Hall Bjørnstad, first of all, who both read the introduction and gave me timely suggestions and the warmest support at a time when I worried that I might have forgotten how to do this kind of thing. Thanks also go to my dear old friend Daniel Shine, a physician and Miltonist with a Johnsonian sense of style who read every chapter as it came off my laptop, humanizing as well as guiding my wayward thoughts.

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Versions of two parts of the book have previously appeared elsewhere. [Chapter 5](#), “Actor, Act, and Action: The Poetics of Agency in Corneille, Racine, and Molière,” was composed out of a journal article entitled “Acting and Ontology in Molière” contributed in 2012 to the 40th-anniversary volume of *Renaissance Drama*, new series, edited by Jeffrey Masten and William West, and an essay entitled “Actor, Act, and Action in Benjamin’s French Baroque,” included in a volume edited by Katherine Ibbett and Hall Bjørnstad titled “Walter Benjamin’s Hypothetical French Trauerspiel,” published in Fall 2013 in *Yale French Studies* 124. I thank all four editors for inviting me to participate in their efforts, and thus for putting me on a track I might not have found on my own. I am moreover particularly indebted to Katherine and Hall in that their volume began as a three-day seminar conducted at an annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association in New Orleans in 2010. Even if the essay I contributed to the volume was not the same as the paper I delivered to the seminar, the thought train the essay explores started there.

Meanwhile, a shorter – if still longish – version of [chapter 7](#), “Groping in the Dark: Aesthetics and Ontology in Diderot and Kant,” appeared in *Word & Image* 29.1 (2013), edited by Michèle Hanoosh and Catriona MacLeod. The original text benefited greatly from their attentions, and from those of their outside reader, Marian Hobson. Marian in particular administered a couple of swift raps across the knuckles I sorely needed.

Finally, and as always, there is Helen. I owe her everything, and not least life itself. I pray that Dostoevsky Boy may yet become the person she deserves.

EXPERIMENTAL SELVES

Person and Experience in Early Modern Europe

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Changing the Subject: Early Modern Persons and the Culture of Experiment

In the third act of Molière's *Don Juan* (1665) occurs a scene that speaks directly to my thesis. The title character and his servant Sganarelle travel through a forest in flight from armed horsemen intent on avenging their jilted sister's honour. The heat of the chase now past, they lapse into conversation when, taking his cue from the doctor's robe he wears as a disguise to help cover their flight, Sganarelle's thoughts turn to doctrine. Having ascertained that Don Juan believes in neither God nor the Devil, the After Life nor the Bogeyman, and that even the miracles of modern medicine meet with scorn, he demands to know what he does in fact believe. "I believe that two and two make four, Sganarelle, and that four and four make eight."¹

Dismayed by the nihilistic poverty of his master's creed, yet emboldened by the air of authority his doctor's gown imparts, the comic servant launches into passionately unguarded speech. Though he is, "praise God," an ignorant man, even he can grasp the lessons of natural religion. "This world," he protests, "didn't spring up overnight like a mushroom." And where did the ingenious "contrivances" (*inventions*) that compose the human body come from if not the intelligent designer whose benevolent wisdom they proclaim? Warming to his theme, Sganarelle mounts a spirited defence of the core value his master's scepticism imperils: the dignity attached to even the most inconsequential human being. He asserts possession of "something or other" in his head capable of thinking a hundred thoughts in an instant and of moving his body in any direction he (or it) wills. He illustrates the latter point by breaking into a wild demonstrative dance – only to catch his toe in his robe and land smack on his face. "Good," Don Juan replies, "your argument just broke its nose" (875–6).

This inspired bit of metaphysical tomfoolery blends low-brow slapstick with genuine alarm at the moral implications of the master's cynicism. Unlike the fatuous tricksters of his sources in Tirso de Molina and the *commedia dell'arte*, Molière's Don Juan is a *libertin érudit* as well as a *libertin de mœurs*:

a conspicuously literate materialist of a distinctly Hobbesian stamp for whom conventional morality conceals the fundamentally predatory nature of human appetite and relationship. Yet the upshot of the master's disabused assertion of humanity's innate savagery is not only the series of reprehensible deeds legend imputes to him – his heartless exploitation of women seduced by promises of marriage, bourgeois tradesmen to whom he fails to pay his debts, or pious fathers blinded by naive notions of family honour. It is the appalling realization that he *may be right*. The fright Sganarelle takes identifies the scene's mocking intertext. Foolishly garbled, and tangled in ludicrous pantomime, the tenor of Sganarelle's defence is unmistakably that of Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

Composed in 1486 to win over an audience of churchmen disquieted by the grandiose claims humanists made on behalf of unassisted human intellect, the *Oration* grants a quasi-angelic stature to the ideal of human learning embodied by "the philosopher." To modern eyes, as to those of the churchly sceptics whose misgivings Pico sought to allay, the *Oration's* philosopher is a dubious if not unwholesome creature. Pico infused him with an intoxicating mixture of arcane disciplinary practices culled from a dizzyingly eclectic range of sources. The speech draws on everything from the reconstructed remains of classical letters to alchemy, and from Jewish mystical writings to ancient Egyptian wisdom lore – much of this last forged by scholars only too happy to fabricate immemorial authority where they could not actually lay hands on it.² The philosopher's teachings thus fused kabbalism, hermeticism, and natural magic in a Christianized neo-Platonic brew calculated to secure both the intelligibility of God's cosmic plan and humanity's inborn power to comprehend it.

Pico's philosopher perches at the apex of the pyramid of lower forms of existence, scanning the heavenly kingdom beyond the fixed stars. In Piconian Man, God's creature soars in thought towards a true grasp of the cosmic order and the providential scheme to which it bears witness. Like all creatures, the philosopher is mortal. Yet the Creator's gift of reason imbues his earthly condition with the quicksilver of divinity. When we add charitable love for lesser creatures as expressive works of God's hand and the spirit of justice that entitles human beings to rule over nature in God's name, humanity's right triumphs over churchly suspicion.³ The *Oration* becomes the model for the famous (if characteristically ambivalent) words of praise Hamlet (1603) pronounces on humankind's behalf to the venal courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals.⁴

We should nonetheless not forget how deeply the *Oration's* euphoric optimism depended on its author's ignorance of impending events. In 1486, the tide of Italian humanism was still at its height and, though sorely strained, the unity of the Church was as yet unbroken. America lay hidden on the far side of the Atlantic, and learned contemplation of the awe-inspiring perfection of the Ptolemaic universe remained untroubled by Copernican heliocentrism. Above all, the political disasters unleashed by the French invasion of Italy in 1494, bringing in its wake an epidemic of syphilis whose timing induced Italians to call it the *morbus gallicus*, stood only on the horizon. Pico's faith in what he and his humanist comrades could achieve was thus almost wholly untested. Even as the neo-Platonic elements of his thought won such wide currency that the worldly nobles assembled in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528) could plausibly be said to embrace them, the world was about to change, leaving his stirring portrait of human excellence in ruins.

Whence the misanthropic twist Hamlet's boast takes the moment the words are out of his mouth, the encomium of the human species ending in a smutty double-entendre in which the lower registers of the human condition surge to the fore: "and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so" (2.2.289–92). But whence too the catastrophe that overtakes Sganarelle's mangled version of Pico's address. Don Juan puts our deep-seated sense of human worth to a test it only survives thanks to a *deus ex machina* scene by which nobody was fooled even at the time. Further, the subject of that test, at once the patient exposed to what, using the period's legal term of art for forensic torture, Francis Bacon called the "vexations" of empirical experiment and the instrument employed to measure their effects, is the human person: Sganarelle of course, but also those readers and spectators whose own moral character falls under attack.

1. The Question

The episode highlights what I take to be the single most salient fact about self as early moderns increasingly experienced it: that it was, precisely, a matter of experience. Self, or, to use the word early moderns more freely chose, the person modelled for them in the avalanche of portraits that signalled its newfound primacy and ubiquity, was many things. It was a puzzling if (on the whole) admirable composite of physical and mental faculties: reason, imagination, the senses, memory, will. It had also acquired many things, and in particular, alongside sets of "natural" and "civil" rights people had not closely attended to before, a growing inventory of liberties and the possessions on which they bore: life and the freedom to preserve it; opinions and the freedom to express them;

conscience and the freedom to exercise it; desires and the freedom to satisfy them; perhaps above all property and the freedom to make, consume, defend, buy, sell, and inherit it. However, as the early modern habit of inventorying such matters reminds us by pointing to the term's root in the Latin *inventio*, denoting an art of finding as well as creating, self was before anything else the medium and content of direct personal experience.

Not that either item was new. To be sure, concepts of self and experience were subject to dramatic transformations throughout the period, registered by shifts in how old words were used to describe the range of phenomena they covered and the minting of new ones to capture nuances that lacked proper names. Terence Cave charts the exemplary career of the French objective pronoun *moi* from the later sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century.⁵ Originally restricted to its core grammatical function as the form the first-person pronoun takes in becoming the object of a preposition or verb, *moi* began to compete with the more general abstract term, *le soi*. As Michel de Montaigne used it in the 1580s, *moi* remained an objective pronoun. Yet the word acquired new weight by signalling the experience of self as something inalienably personal, substantial, and unique. From there it was a short if momentous step to the full-blown substantive that Blaise Pascal deployed in the *Pensées* (1670) to single out what each of us encounters as the essential if, in his eyes, also hateful thing one just is.

Disturbed by Montaigne's quizzically decentred picture of self, René Descartes secured the sense of personal agency the *cogito* declares by replacing the inchoate objective *moi* of everyday experience with the self-determined *je* whose grammatical as well as philosophical privilege it is to think, will, apprehend, and decide. In answer, Pascal endorsed Montaigne's insistence on creaturely dependence on both external circumstance and largely unconscious internal biases and drives in order to refute what he saw as Descartes's arrogantly Quixotic claims. So it was Pascal who, in reformulating the question the *cogito* begs in identifying private consciousness as the self-disciplined ground of apodictic certainty, asked not, like Descartes, "But what is it then I am?" but rather "Qu'est-ce que le moi?" What is the poignantly vulnerable yet insatiably demanding creature each of us calls *me*?⁶

Nevertheless, self and experience have always been the object of the kind of personal preoccupation and care Michel Foucault recovered in ancient letters and sought to cultivate in his later private as well as philosophic life.⁷ The Delphic injunction to "know thyself"; the Pauline picture of will torn between faithful hope of deliverance and the overwhelming cravings of sinful flesh; the secret longings of troubadours and knights errant; the heroic ego of epic, the self-overcoming Stoic, or the domineering medieval lord – not to mention the self-betraying ironies that beset everyone from Sophocles' Oedipus

or Plato's Alcibiades to Francesco Petrarca's *Secretum* and the first-person dreamer of *The Romance of the Rose*: all bear witness to the unbroken continuity of notions of self, experience, and the inextricable bond they form. As Pascal puts it to the model *honnête homme* of the day, the eminently self-fashioning bourgeois gentleman Damien Miton: "The *moi* is hateful. You cloak it, Miton, but you don't get rid of it for all that: you are thus always hateful" (Sellier 494). We may civilize *le moi*, giving it nicer table manners and habits of personal hygiene to form the self-policing *homo clausus* of Norbert Elias's account of early modern court life.⁸ But whether, like Pascal, we loathe it, share the whimsical good humour with which Montaigne monitors its freakish flights, or join the satirical Molière in defending even as we mock it, we can never escape its insistent thingliness.

What is new however is that self and the experience in which it comes to be known were no longer seen as givens derived from the higher, a priori instances from which tradition derived them. In becoming Pascal's *moi*, self ceased to fit neatly into the pattern that enabled Aristotle to plot the "good" because "true" human being in terms of proximity to the rational norm placed at the midpoint between complementary vices of excess and deficiency. It was thus much harder to strike the natural balance that defined courage as the mean between rashness and cowardice, and lawful self-respect as that between Alcibiades' notorious hubris and the grovelling fit for a slave.⁹ But self also ceased to express the divine will disclosed in scripture, the Patristic writings, or the moral law. While the notion continued to keep people up at night, they no longer saw themselves as helpless sinners whose worth was wholly determined by the struggle to conform to the temporal "estate" to which divine providence called them. They were then no longer simply what the consecrated order identified them as being: a knight, a lady, a priest, a peasant, a merchant, a king.¹⁰ They had instead become the question Pascal asks: "Qu'est-ce que le moi?"

2. Evidence and Self-Evidence

What is more, answering that question turned out to be a factual matter, settled by empirical events. For experience too had changed in dialectical tandem with the sense of the self to which experience is given and by which it comes to be shaped and used.

True, as we noted a moment ago, experience and the empirical happenings from which it springs have a venerable history, antedating the upheavals of the early modern era. Indeed, following Aristotle, medieval scholastics had taught that all knowledge of the natural world begins in the senses long before John Locke made the notion the cornerstone of his empiricist account. But, as the

historian of science Peter Dear reminds us, the experiences in which the ancients and their medieval and early Renaissance successors grounded natural knowledge chiefly derived from the “common” experience of phenomena whose regular recurrence granted them the status of cosmological constants.¹¹ The sun was known to orbit the earth because it was an item of everyone’s plain observation that it rose in the east each morning and set in the west at night. Similarly, it was known that acorns grow into oak trees because they were invariably seen to do so under the right conditions of sunlight, rain, and nourishing soil.

However, as indicated by the circularity notions of rightness introduced into the mix, the truths of experience were not proved by experience except insofar as experience itself was seen to bear witness to those higher instances (the “final causes” of Aristotelian physics and biology or the mysteries of divine intent) that underwrote its intelligibility. Things happen, in this view, because it is in their nature to do so as expressions of a higher rational order, now immanent in the Stoic or neo-Platonic World Soul, now transcendent in the dispensations of divine will. A signal result was the difficulty the ancients and their medieval and Renaissance successors had in explaining “unnatural” events: those deviations from the norms of common experience seen as miracles, monsters, or portents precisely because they lacked a basis in the system of readily graspable reasons dictated by piety, by philosophical contemplation of the timeless “nature of things,” or simply by the fact that such is the common order of everyday observation.¹²

But that is the point, and nowhere more visibly or dramatically than in what experience was seen to reveal about our own natures as human beings. For its lessons lost the status of being mere illustrations of a priori truths like those that had once taught what “good” because “true” human beings are. According to the “exemplar” theory of history Timothy Hampton maps, the hubristic folly of Alcibiades or the all-too-human weakness of St Peter denying Christ were conceived less as uncovering particular facts about empirical individuals than as instancing general facts about human nature at large already known on higher grounds.¹³ The epistemic value of the examples drawn from experience thus stemmed from prior acknowledgment of what French still calls *évidences*, truths endowed with the character of self-evidence. It was then “evident” from the evil end Alcibiades met, assassinated by outraged compatriots, that he had led an ignoble life, just as it was “evident” from Peter’s denial of Jesus that human frailty is capable of nothing in the absence of God’s grace. More exactly, just as we know an acorn is that entity whose nature it is to grow into an oak, so Alcibiades simply was the man his ignoble destiny showed him to have been, just as Peter simply was the man predestined to deny Christ even if he was also foreordained to become the rock on which Christ built his church.

But the evident is not evidence, least of all of the sort a genuinely empirical conception of reality deploys.¹⁴ It dramatizes, clarifies, and confirms what higher authority teaches to be self-evident, quite apart from what direct experience urges. Evidence, by contrast, discloses something new, leading to findings impossible without it. The result moreover is wholly natural – not in the sense in which Aristotle would have asserted, as a logical consequence of the rational idea of what nature is, was, and ever shall be; but rather as the expression of what nature is discovered to be on the basis of empirical, and so strictly naturalistic, trial. Which means that the result will also be thoroughly contingent. As incontrovertible as it may be, what we discover by empirical means could always have been different. There is no absolute, divinely or naturally appointed reason why the world is the way we find it to be. Everything comes down to the human experience of events.

3. Experience, Experiment, and Experimental Selves

Early moderns knew they had selves, and learned something about what those selves were, enjoined, and permitted, because they experienced them: now in the unmediated deliverances of ordinary sensation; now as correlates of the composite body-mind they discovered themselves to be as a fact of nature and to possess in the form of person; now as the source of often disturbing urges, dreams, enthusiasms, and delusions that were as perplexing as they were undeniable. Nor, further, were these discoveries of the purely private sort that the standard reading of the testimony of Montaigne's *Essays* or of Shakespearean soliloquy encourages us to imagine. Early moderns also knew they had selves because other people assigned them in the course of everyday traffic and encounter. Selves were thus, among other things, the internalized expression of the culturally constructed identities that obliged Sganarelle to acknowledge himself to be the servant of the undeserving beneficiary of a contingent yet irresistibly coercive social hierarchy.

But early moderns knew they had selves above all because those selves turned out to be inherently experimental. In calling early modern selves experimental, I take advantage of the far wider semantic range the word enjoyed at the time than it does today. I hope thereby to convey a richer as well as more accurate sense not only of what early moderns made of experience but also of what we could. For experience as we tend to understand (and indeed experience) it today is both sharply divided and subtly diminished by preoccupation with that special mode of experience for which the institutionalization of modern science reserves the name "experiment."

The process was well underway by the mid-seventeenth century. When Robert Boyle constructed the iconic air-pump that enabled him to adduce “matters of fact” and the law-like regularities they exhibit, the resulting experiments were just experience. Various substances were exposed to mechanical manipulation in a transparent glass receiver, and assistants worked the pump until something happened while reliable witnesses stood about to watch.¹⁵ To this extent, experimental “virtuosi” like Boyle and his colleagues in the Royal Society were no different from the mechanics, clockmakers, smiths, and medical or alchemical “empirics” who had preceded them and from whom they picked up much of what they taught themselves to do.¹⁶ Yet the point of such experiments was to give experience new shape and authority by causing things to occur in strict obedience to the rational protocols Boyle and his associates devised in order to discipline both the work they did and how they understood their findings.

Nor was it just a matter of avoiding the adhocery of their artisan forebears. They also evicted the cosmological fantasies of alchemists like Paracelsus or “natural magicians” like Pico, all too ready to see symbolic parallels and magic “sympathies” that preserved the at once theocentric and anthropomorphic vision of reality inherited from tradition.¹⁷ By contrast, virtuosi schooled themselves to observe pure physical events explained on immanent natural grounds alone, a discipline that changed minds as well as the matters minds explored. What natural philosophers regarded as constituting genuine knowledge had accordingly been reduced to two sources: reason, which directs the search for empirical evidence and interprets the results; and direct sensory experience, which both generates and contains that evidence.

It is however already telling that the metaphysical as well as epistemological force of this reduction stemmed from the prior exclusion of a third kind of knowledge, that derived from divine revelation.¹⁸ Whatever scripture or, absent the miracles scripture relates, the inner light of private faith might promise or plead, even convinced Christians like Boyle took it as axiomatic that we can only know such things as, guided by the “natural light” of reason, we contrive to grant the form of sensory observation.¹⁹ As a result, the role experience plays in the search for truth had been narrowed to include only those elements that were susceptible to specifically empirical exhibition, measurement, and test. Experiments in this sense had also to be public and, in principle if not always practice, reproducible.²⁰ To count as knowledge rather than pure “subjective” reports, the experience produced in a laboratory had to be available to others in a behavioural form they could replicate for themselves. Failing to meet these twin standards, truth claims became “merely” subjective and were set aside.

A byproduct of this arrangement has been a twofold mutilation of the field of experience at large. Whole ranges of experience lose not only all authority as potential sources of insight but also whatever reality they may intrinsically possess. This process too was well underway in the seventeenth century, most visibly in the early modern doctrine of “secondary qualities.”²¹ Our experience of such striking yet specious properties of the sensible world as colour, texture, or taste were written off as epiphenomenal side-effects of the operation of underlying “primary qualities” (number, dimension, shape, location, and states of motion or rest) alone deemed real in and of themselves as they appear in experience. We measure the magnitude of the loss when we recall the role that metaphors of colour, warmth, or savour play in ordinary assessments of what makes life worth living. But other, still more far-reaching examples include the aesthetic, moral, and teleological values we claim to find in experience as such. Judgments of beauty and ugliness, good and bad, right and wrong, the meaningful and the senseless, cease to have clear referents and so an authoritative place in accounts of what truly exists.²²

The reduction of the “merely subjective” elements of experience to the status of incompletely interpreted byproducts of “objective” realities that determine them from below has had further consequences. For a start, experience in general, as distinct from the limited, putatively probative forms produced in the contrived spaces of empirical experiment, loses much of its power to teach. What cannot be given the form of a controlled experiment is simply discarded – a gesture Descartes emblematically performed in his *Discourse on the Method* of 1637. He did so first when deciding that the biographical circumstances surrounding his memorable illumination into the nature and powers of rational method had no bearing on the substance of what he learned (1.578–9). He thereby drew a sharp line between truth and what has come to be called the mere “context of discovery,” disconnecting the content of our insights from the broader social and historical factors by which they are perforce conditioned.²³ And he performed it again when determining that matters of personal morals could be left in a “provisional” state pending a future analysis he never in fact undertook (1.591–8).

And what is true of the directly personal forms of experience Descartes set aside in the *Discourse*, the “lived” experience German calls *Erlebnis*, is equally so of the wider, more communitarian modes to which German gives the contrasting name of *Erfahrung*.²⁴ *Erlebnis* denotes the immediate data of private experience in which empiricists like Locke found the “impressions” and “sensations” that supply the building blocks of perception-based knowledge. *Erfahrung* deepens the perspective by introducing the dimension of time inscribed in the

root verb *fahren*, meaning to travel but also to fare or undergo. While *Erlebnis* picks out the discrete instants in which experience unfolds, *Erfahrung* emphasizes the accumulation that comes with age. It incorporates not just the raw givens of day-to-day existence but how these are digested over time to form the memories, personal narratives, and practical rules of thumb that grant them the form of a life.

But *Erfahrung* introduces a social dimension as well: life becomes a feature of the sort of broader life-world Ludwig Wittgenstein has in mind in exploring the communal basis for our use of even the simplest names for things.²⁵ In this sense, the term denotes the fund of experience, passed on from person to person and one generation to the next, that we share with family, neighbours, and the culture into which we are born. Rules of thumb become proverbs, memories tales, and tales the traditions that confer the depth of *longue durée* on passing moments of time. Sganarelle's foolish talk of the bogeyman is germane here. Molière's comic servant is nothing if not an unapologetic spokesperson for the legends, superstitions, and prejudices of his caste. Yet he speaks too, by the same token, for the deeply felt canons of common decency his master flouts, and so for the common ground without which living becomes the lonely and bitter business Don Juan believes it to be.

Still, rich as it undoubtedly is, *Erfahrung* proves just as subject to reduction as colour or private circumstance. Where it is not cheapened as vulgar superstition and prejudice, it looks ad hoc and "anecdotal": an arbitrary jumble of isolated data points incapable of providing the order found in methodical reasoning or experimental matters of fact. It is just here, though, that period usage proves helpful. Early moderns were deeply engaged in reconfiguring concepts of experience and the knowledge it affords, elaborating the basic protocols of modern empirical science. But the language they used to do so retained a versatility that made room for a more nuanced and capacious sense of experience, and concomitantly of person, than the more exact idiom of our own day allows.

Though now confined to the realm of scientific experimentation, the adjective experimental described whatever pertains to experience of any sort, whether narrowly experimental in our modern sense or not. The more religiously inclined, High Anglicans and Roman Catholics as much as "enthusiastic" proponents of private revelation, could accordingly talk about the "experimental knowledge of God" understood as a direct encounter with the divine accessible to anyone attuned to it. Similarly, even as late as the high Enlightenment, the "experimental method" David Hume applied to human nature, science, aesthetic criticism, and morals encompassed experiences of every sort, down to the most intimate pangs of pleasure or pain, approval or disgust, hope, anger, or fear.

In speaking, then, of experimental persons or selves, we not only avoid the ungainly “experiential” we have had to devise in order to distinguish those forms of experience that, salient though they are, fail to meet modern experimental standards. We can reclaim the genuine epistemic value early moderns attached to even the most trivial encounters and sensations from which they composed their picture of both person and reality even as the more epistemologically daring among them drew the distinctions we now take for granted.

4. Changing the Subject

Exploiting the etymological accident of the adjective’s generous semantic range in early modern use enables us to do a number of things. We can make more of the fact that a deep personal commitment to aesthetic, moral, and teleological values exceeding the level of brute materiality Thomas Hobbes or Molière’s Don Juan insist on survived even among those most busily involved in undermining those values. The empirical evidence that natural philosophers like Boyle, Isaac Newton, or Samuel Clarke adduced in defence of Christian faith was typical from this standpoint. The experimental methods employed to establish matters of fact were as rigorously naturalistic then as they are today. Yet this did not prevent people from trying to “save the appearances” for faith by claiming to find in the majestic spectacle of the natural world rational proof of the Creator’s existence secured beyond what the parallel discourse of judicial rules of evidence had just then come to call all “reasonable doubt.”²⁶ The methods they employed in their work as natural philosophers did produce increasingly demoralized findings – witness the ridicule Molière visits on poor Sganarelle’s attempt to mount the kind of proof from design Boyle or Clarke managed far more elegantly, if in the end to as little purpose. Yet we misconstrue the dynamic of period faith and feeling, and so of the period sense of person, if we look too far ahead to the disenchanting sequel.

More importantly, the notion that self was an experimental phenomenon dispels confusions that have dogged early modern studies for nearly half a century. In particular, it encourages us to rid ourselves of an idea that has been deeply entrenched in both philosophy of mind and European cultural and intellectual history since Immanuel Kant. For especially among literary and cultural historians persuaded by Continental conceptions of the springs of European modernity, we have formed the habit of explaining the authority that self and experience came to exercise in terms of the advent of the so-called modern subject: the self-disciplined and, on that basis, self-determining instrumental ego traditionally associated with Descartes.

As used by Kant, the term “subject” denotes the conscious individual just in virtue of his or her being so. It targets person as a function of awareness and everything that accompanies it: the existence of external “objects” and the mental architecture that enables consciousness to perceive, organize, and act on them; the problem of “subjectivity” that arises because of the presumed “split” by which “subject” and “object” are set more or less radically apart as a direct expression of the former’s awareness of the latter; and so too the search for “objectivity,” that orthopsychic mode of consciousness in which the “subject” may to some degree discipline and so transcend his or her self-enclosed “subjective” condition in order to grasp the “object” in its autonomy.²⁷

The term does possess a certain utility as a kind of shorthand. If the aim is to focus on individual persons as an expression of their possession of the gift of awareness as distinguished from everything else that goes into making them what they are, then something like the word “subject” comes in handy. It is certainly to be preferred to the alternative, “consciousness,” especially in English.²⁸ In German and the Romance languages, the equivalent terms (*Bewußtsein*, *conscience*, *conoscenza*, *consienza*) come with articles, enabling people to speak of “a consciousness” and even “consciousnesses” without necessarily sounding odd. By contrast, English holds fast to the conviction that the word designates a state or condition rather than a person or thing by omitting articles and by speaking of consciousness in the plural only sparingly. In any event, given that the defining fact of human existence for Kant is consciousness, he needed a word to name the resulting entity, and “subject” (*der Subjekt*) is the one he found.

By now the term has become a shibboleth in literary and cultural studies: we use it to convey both what we are talking about and the fact that we belong to the intellectual tribe that talks that way. A working knowledge of the vocabulary of philosophy is a badge of seriousness, and since our preferred, usually Continental, philosophers use the word, literary humanists naturally follow suit. It is nevertheless worth pausing to consider how Kant came to choose the term and whether that choice was justified or helpful.

The word subject comes from the Latin *subiectum*, meaning something thrown down in offering or exchange, for discussion or observation, or as the result of some external act of coercion or “subjection.” It accordingly has many uses. In politics, it candidly denotes the coercive element in that a “subject of the Crown” or a “subject (as opposed to citizen) of the state” is immediately placed in a subaltern position of passive obedience. A similar use appears in police investigations and the natural, medical, and social sciences, where “the subject” is in fact the *object*. To be the “subject” of an experiment, a course of

treatment, or an official inquiry is to be subjected to close (and often secret) surveillance and manipulation over which one has little or no control.²⁹

However, as the philosopher Alain de Libera observes in his recent “archaeology” of the “modern subject,” the one thing the term did not denote before Kant was an individual consciousness or agent. In philosophical usage in particular, it simply served to designate whatever it was that a philosopher happened to be talking about. As such, “subjects” came in two flavours: as what de Libera calls “subjects of inherence,” where the word singled out some entity in terms of the properties that define it as being the entity it is; or as “subjects of attribution,” where the focus falls on those properties we assign it, by, say, imputing some sacred or symbolic function or meaning to it, or by electing or appointing some person to a public office.³⁰ In either case, the “subject” was fundamentally a recipient. In claiming that some set of properties inheres to a given “subject” as defining either the “form” or “essence” that constitutes the class to which it belongs or the “accidents” that distinguish it from other members of that class, we assume that the natural processes that brought it into being endowed or implanted it with the properties in question. Meanwhile, in attributing qualities to various things or persons in terms of the public place they occupy or the role they perform in social and, more broadly, practical life, we grant them a character they did not possess before, but which nonetheless henceforth defines them in just the way natural properties do.³¹

All of which is to say that, before Kant, all of the properties “subjects” were said to possess, whether by inherence or attribution, and whether as being essential or accidental determinants of their identities and natures, were predicates. “The subject” was thus, at bottom, the grammatical subject of the verb, a role it plays, moreover, whether it is the agent or the patient of the action the verb describes: since I am the subject of the sentences “I hit” and “I’m hit” alike, the pronoun takes the subjective (in Latin, the nominative) case just the same.³² Though the subject of a verb may well be the patient of the action described, it still takes the grammatical lead: all accompanying elements of the sentence conform to its case, number, and, in German and the Romance languages, gender. The sentence is thus shaped with systematic reference to “the subject.” Further, in I-statements, the subject of the sentence in the sense of denoting the person about whom the sentence speaks also utters that sentence. He or she becomes what Émile Benveniste taught us to call the “speaking subject,” source of the utterance in which he or she appears.³³ And since, in all natural languages at least, every utterance has an implicit human source, the “speaking subject” acquires the same kind of semantic range and authority as the conscious one we use the term to identify today.

It is then to considerations like these that we owe Kant's coinage. Kant set himself a double task. He had to define an object of philosophical analysis that was a "subject" in the special derivative sense his descendants have in mind. In order to be brought under scrupulous "objective" study, the "subject" had to be singled out as an entity of some sort. However, a constitutive feature of the entity so framed is that it is not just an entity like any other. And what distinguished it from all others was consciousness of its own self-governing existence. As Kant explains in his discussion of "apperception," that non-thematic yet continuous awareness of oneself that accompanies any particular moment, state, or "act" of consciousness, the fact of consciousness always calls the tune in that everything that appears or occurs to a conscious person does so as an expression of that person's conscious relation to it.³⁴ Every proposition that issues from my mouth, but also, and more fundamentally, every experience that I call my own, is thus coloured by the fact that it is precisely mine. It is a function of my awareness of it, of the standpoint in time and space in which it happens to me, and so of everything I bring to the encounter in terms of my own private interests, habits, training, character, and feeling.

The term "subject" thus does a lot of work with minimum effort. Yet, in doing so, it not only brings together notions and phenomena that might better be teased apart; the form it imposes on them creates most of the philosophical dilemmas with which philosophy of mind and epistemology continue to wrangle. Kant and his successors are right to track the problem of "the subject" back to Descartes even if he himself did not use the word this way. In particular, the problem of solipsism and the related problem of radical scepticism are largely artefacts of the way in which Descartes set about solving them. It strikes me, though, that, beyond institutionalizing what was already a mistake in Descartes, Kantian usage has deepened our difficulties. And it has done so by giving their core referent, the conscious person, a name whose multiple cognates and connotations breed confusions that compound rather than correct Descartes's misstep.

Descartes's mistake is dualism. In defining person exclusively in terms of consciousness, he locks it into the mental bubble formed both by consciousness itself, as *res cogitans*, and by the very idea that such a thing (as opposed to state or condition) might actually exist independent of our experiences of it – this indeed provides the framework for that curious shadow of self-conscious existence Kant called the "transcendental ego" in contrast to the merely "empirical" one we call our own. The two notions reinforce each other. In deciding, in the *cogito*, that the only thing I securely know about myself is the fact of "thinking" or being aware, Descartes persuades himself to think of thinking as a thing. It may be, as he insists, a thoroughly disembodied thing; but it remains a thing

just the same, floating out there somewhere, waiting to be discovered – just what he claims to have done in purporting to have hit on it as the purified residue left behind by the solvent of hyperbolic doubt. But this thing is also formed by the notion that something of the sort must exist for us to have, precisely, some notion of its existence. The thing is even arguably nothing more than that notion. Descartes thinks and, in thinking, comes across a mental entity he takes to be thinking itself. There must then be some thing out there that at once is and does this thinking rather than the activity human beings undertake when engaged in the business of forming thoughts.

That alternatives to Descartes's view were readily available is confirmed by the sets of objections that both the rationalist Hobbes and the Epicurean atomist Pierre Gassendi contributed to the volume that presented his *Meditations on First Philosophy* to the world in 1641. Hobbes argued that to call the mind a thinking thing because it thinks is as senseless as to say it is a stroll because it decides to go for a walk; and Gassendi found the notion of disembodied intelligence so patently absurd that he peppered his remarks with the mocking apostrophe *O, Spiritu!* (Oh, Mental One; Oh, Spirit) to remind his correspondent of the shared empirical embodiment implied by the mere fact of exchanging opinions.³⁵

Yet the best response before Locke's critique in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690 was the one Baruch Spinoza formulated in the *Ethics* of 1677, in large part because Spinoza was, in other respects, an unusually sympathetic reader, especially on the score of Descartes's assertion of the primacy of pure reason over the perplexed (and perplexing) vagaries of sense. If Spinoza challenged dualism, it was on the strictly rational grounds that to assume consciousness was of a substance different from that of "extended" forms like the human body was to claim that there could in fact be two substances in the world – a notion he took to be a contradiction in terms. For a "substance" is properly something wholly unconditioned by anything else, a criterion violated as soon as more than one of them exist if only because each one must limit (and so condition) the other.³⁶

But, true to the logical consequences of his monistic picture of the essential unity of all natural beings, Spinoza went further. Not only did he portray the mind as inseparable from the body; he showed it to be nothing more than "an idea of the body" as such. In doing so, he deployed a double genitive that defined mind both as something revealed to us in the form of awareness of our own bodily states and as an immanent product of those very states themselves. We first discover mind in the form of the conscious hurts, pleasures, appetites, and frustrations occasioned by our physical engagement in an equally physical world. We as it were come to mind in the process of taking account of the things

we encounter about us as a function of the ways in which those things make us feel – happy or angry, fearful or galvanized by need. Mind is thus an idea about the body that also belongs to it as an expression of the kind of body it is and of its interactions with other bodies in the natural world.³⁷ Descartes therefore mistakes the experience of the body in Spinoza's dual sense for something else. But what is this if not, precisely, his notion of the thing rather than some other thing entirely: the thing that is not a thing; the thing he calls mind?

Descartes's mistake gets worse, however, the moment mind as he defined it becomes "a subject." In the first place, as noted a moment ago, it encourages us to think of self as a more or less passive recipient of whatever predicates we choose to assign it. This as it were categorical passivity underpins and legitimizes Louis Althusser's theory of "interpellation." Identity, in his view, is determined – even if not especially for "the subject" itself – by the way in which the prevailing order defines it by giving it a "proper" name. Self is then what those who have the power to do so call it in the "Hey, you!" that Althusser takes to be the core modality of social relation.³⁸ True, as the example of Sganarelle already suggests, self is indeed, among many other things, the bearer of social identities of this sort. Sganarelle is a servant because that is the role into which society calls him, a role to which he is obliged to conform if only to avoid the beatings of which he complains. But of course he does complain. Further, in defending the irreducible dignity attached to all human beings as such, he demands that his master recognize him as a person independent of his identity as a servant. Insofar as the term "subject" casts its referent in an unavoidably (if often inadvertently) passive light, its use prejudices a wide range of issues by narrowing the range of questions we can ask, and so the range of experiments that not only can be but, in the early modern period, were actively performed.

We see a similar narrowing of semantic angles of attack in the related concept of "subjectivity," whose presence in the language is all the deeper in that virtually everyone uses it even if they have never heard of "subjects" in Kant's sense.³⁹ "Subjectivity" is the name we give the condition or state of being "a subject." It emerges then as part of the attempt to work out what the intrinsic properties of that condition or state might be: self-awareness; or the fact of seeing the world always and only from some definite standpoint or position; or existence as a psycho-physical interior distinct from the external realities to which it nonetheless relates. But this already suggests that a categorical feature of being "a subject" is to be "subjective," and thus cut off from "subjectivity's" parasitic twin in the kind of "objectivity" needed to form an accurate picture of reality by the very nature of the psycho-physical activity through which "the subject" tries to master its world.⁴⁰

This vision is darkened further by semantic drift. No matter how precise philosophical use of the term may be, it is hard, and often impossible, to prevent its various senses from bleeding into one another – in many instances cross-contamination is even taken to be a positive virtue. Perhaps the most egregious example is Jacques Lacan, who makes an unstated yet nonetheless strategic point of shifting between different senses of the term “subject” without warning, on the tacit (and wholly untested) assumption that they all amount to the same thing. At any given moment, the word may accordingly denote many different and even contrasting phenomena. Lacan frequently uses it as a synonym for consciousness. In other places it designates *a* consciousness in the sense of a conscious individual. Moreover, in keeping with his experience as a practicing psychoanalyst writing up case histories, he also uses it as a term for a patient or a target of experimental trial. Given the foundational role he assigned language in determining the shape of both conscious and unconscious life, “subject” also often refers to a grammatical function as the seat of first-person ideation or report. When, in grander moments, Lacan undertakes the critique of Western philosophy of mind as a whole, the term becomes a philosophical concept, identified with the historical formation that produced the “optical” self of so-called classical, Cartesian psychology. Nor do any of these uses preclude any of the others: on the contrary, they can be yoked together to form any combination you choose. Part of the point Lacan sets out to make in this way is that “the subject,” however understood, is in any case never more than an effect of the signifiers used to denote it. Artful slippage from one register to another at the turn of a phrase appears therefore to reveal something fundamental and deep even if the actual result is preening confusion. For, in the absence of scrupulous conceptual analysis or test, semantic slippage literally does all the work. The fact that the one term, “subject,” can denote any or all of these things simultaneously is itself all the proof Lacan needs, or gives.

More common though, and closer to my early modern home, is the merging of philosophical and political uses of the word in discussions of human “governmentality.”⁴¹ The subject as a centre or site of conscious activity (S1) is thus readily identified paronomastically, by mere wordplay, as a political subject (S2). This makes it possible to redefine the inner discipline needed to escape the condition of private “subjectivity” in pursuit of the “objectivity” required for successful agency. The effort to get at the truth of things is transformed into an automatized reflex of the subject’s internalization of the external Law imposed by society, the culture, or the reigning discourse of the moment. The process of becoming a subject in sense S1 is accordingly regarded as entailing subjection in the form of a subject in sense S2.

Conversely, to become a normatively “good,” that is governable subject (S2) demands turning oneself into a normatively “good,” that is well-ordered and right-thinking subject (S1). The private orthopsychic effort to think straight, see clearly, and do right is reduced to subservience to those larger, trans- and so impersonal social forces that dictate what constitutes straight thought, clear-sightedness, and rightness in the first place. Subjectivity amounts to subjugation, and all the more irresistibly in that it proceeds through the subject’s self-subjugation by internal conformity to what the prevailing social order has decreed to be the disciplinary *habitus* of successful conduct, identity, and belief.⁴²

This is of course all punning. Nor is that necessarily a bad thing: the title of this introduction reveals my own affection for the trope. Yet, as with all figures of speech, puns like this owe their power to a capacity to persuade independent of whatever foundation they may have in actual experience. Witness the fact that no one feels the need to test the identifications established in this way by subjecting them (save the word!) to careful logical analysis. As in Lacan, the punning does all the work, carrying the full authority of conceptual demonstration without offering any. True, having created the impression of a relation of homology between conscious and political subjects, we go on to find evidence in the form of all of those features of empirical experience the related terms appear to make new sense of. But the reading is circular: the supporting evidence arises as a back-formation of premises that escape painstaking trial. Rather than begin with the deeds, artefacts, and events we wish to explain, we begin with the equation the pun inspires: $S1 = S2$.

The temptation to take puns for real concepts, and so for real things, is reinforced by another feature of linguistic usage: the unwary use of definite articles that Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin warn about.⁴³ Even in English, where articles are never as mandatory as in other languages, insofar as the term “subject” designates any “subject,” it invites us to use it to identify each one in terms of what they have in common, namely the fact of being “a subject.” But what more exactly do “subjects” so defined have in common if not participation in the general form we proceed to call “*the* subject”?

This train of thought breeds a strange hybrid that is at once a separate individual and the embodiment of a class – and even, pushing further, an embodiment of that class just in virtue of being an individual.⁴⁴ The class then comes to exhibit the character of an individual and the individual that of the class. On one side, it appears as though there can in fact be no individual except insofar as he or she conforms to overarching type. But since, historically, sociologically, and empirically, the world is populated by historical, social, and empirical individuals, the set of types proliferates. Kantian subject-talk has thus spawned a whole

range of hybrid creatures whose reality is vouched for by the way philosophical usage enables us to name them: “the subject” of course, but also “the modern” and “post-modern subject,” followed quickly and remorselessly by “the subject of psychoanalysis,” of “history,” of “science,” of “civility,” of “childhood,” of “liberty,” of “gender,” of “love,” and so on to infinity. Each of these verbal formations has a certain appeal, especially when projected against the background of the $S1 = S2$ equation. As applied, for instance, to the study of Renaissance courtesy books, the “subject of civility” can seem especially promising, involving as it does notions of dressage and Greenblattian self-fashioning.⁴⁵ But it is a question whether, in using it, we gain more in the way of eye-catching salience than we lose in close-grained social or historical detail.

To which I would add one further point: the essential emptiness of the abstract noun we employ to identify the quality or character of “subjectivity” that all “subjects” are presumed to share. It is already telling that we do not generally use the word and its adjectival consort to describe “subjects” or persons themselves – under what circumstances would we find ourselves calling some woman, man, or child “subjective”? We reserve the term rather for their perceptions, assumptions, judgments, or states of mind. But what, if anything, does use of the term contribute beyond indicating that a given perception or judgment is somehow coloured, skewed, distorted, or befogged by an otherwise unnamed personal element capable of taking an almost infinite variety of distinctly different forms? One may, for instance, be blinded by prejudice, seduced by self-interest, driven by fear, overcome by emotion, or possessed by some inner demon. Terming such occurrences “subjective” says nothing that is not already more perspicuously said by calling a spade a spade. Worse, by encouraging us to adduce such things as evidence of an underlying condition, “subjectivity,” that is not only endemic to the species but an implicitly pathological deviation from an “objective” norm that is itself parasitic on the condition it claims to cure, we lose sight of their corrigibility. Even in the twenty-first century of talk radio and Twitter, people do occasionally awake from dogmatic slumber when confronted with the errors they commit and the facts that prove them wrong.

All of which begs the question: is Kant’s term appropriate to the early modern world at all? For, as de Libera’s archaeology reminds us, whatever else early modern persons may have been, and however closely some of them espoused Descartes’s portrayal of conscious being, they were not “subjects” in our current philosophical sense of the word. They were, to be sure, political subjects, schooled in obedience to the prevailing forms of political and religious authority the age presented. Yet if there was anything their experience as conscious beings taught them, it was not only the increasingly outspoken right to think for themselves but the fact that they already did so. Where then use of the term

“subject” encourages us to see them, paronomastically, as self-subjugating prisoners of the very activities in which they exercised their independent powers of perception, observation, judgment, and experiment, abandoning that usage enables us to explore the available evidence with fresh eyes.⁴⁶

5. Dimensions of Self and Early Modern Persons

Ridding ourselves of “the subject” as the term used to denote what early moderns tended to call person may thus relieve us of the temptation to see them as prisoners of their own self-subjugating ideas about self, world, and the relation between them. Early moderns worried about these things. They knew as well as we the risk of radical alienation from the world, other people, and ourselves. Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1615) gives us a vivid picture of the disease, and Shakespeare’s exploration of the “green-eyed monster” of sexual jealousy in *Othello* (1603) another. But as these examples already hint, the forms of alienation experienced in madness or jealousy were not simply internal matters, real as the inner suffering involved might be. They were also matters of public import and comment in that they produced clearly detectible public symptoms and behaviour that affected other people and disturbed communal order.

Madness and jealousy occur not only inside one’s own head (“O full of scorpions is my mind!”) but in the world: they are indeed, among other things, ways of *being* in the world and, as such, make things happen there. This is one of the deepest insights informing Cervantes’s management of the delusions of Don Quixote. For not only does the benighted hidalgo think crazy things; he does them; and what he does has the habit of making other people do things that are arguably just as crazy as anything he undertakes. Thus the Bachelor Carrasco takes on the persona of the Knight of the Mirrors, donning the costume, forms of speech, and haughty demeanour of a *caballero* of romance in order to hunt Don Quixote down to cure his disease by defeating him in knightly combat. In a politically more pointed vein, a characteristic byproduct of the paternal *idée fixe* in Moliéresque comedy is the way it bends family life out of shape by compelling other members of the household to conform to the distortions of perception and moral feeling incident to the father’s piety, avarice, or hypochondria. It is not just that, in his monomaniacal pursuit of personal salvation, the Orgon of *Tartuffe* (1669) cannot tell the difference between true devotion and hypocrisy. He imposes his will, and so delusion, on everyone else, to the point of getting them all evicted from their home, left penniless in the street.

Early modern portrayals of madness and jealousy underscore the important point Jerrold Seigel makes in *The Idea of the Self*. Looked at closely, self

is a three- and even four-dimensional phenomenon.⁴⁷ There is the inner being, whether defined as mind, consciousness, character, or personality, together with the perceptions, volitions, and feelings it experiences and the ideas it entertains as a function of its internal life. There is also the body, complete with senses and material needs, biological urges, powers, and limits. But there is further, and capitably, the dimension of social relation: the fact that human beings are not just minds or bodies, or even body-minds of a Hobbesian or Spinozan cast, but members of families and communities in which they engage not only with an external environment but with others of their kind. And then there is the element of time: the fact that we live, grow, mature, and die in a world that changes as we do.

Different people weight these dimensions differently, and do so differently at different times: Descartes paid closer attention to the claims of bodily experience late in life than in early maturity.⁴⁸ A signal virtue of Seigel's book is the way it documents the impact such differences have had on how various British, French, and German thinkers from Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz to Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault have pictured self. But the crucial insight is that, whatever the relative weightings, and however adamantly a given commentator may insist on the centrality of one or another of these terms, self has never been unilaterally determined by any one of them. It has instead arisen as the theatre and nexus of the evolving interactions between them. Self is the experience of mind, body, and social relation over time. And the medium of that experience is deepening encounter not only with oneself but with other selves, and thus with the self as made known to us through other selves – as seen through eyes other than our own.

Thus, when pressed to come up with a word for self as a general concept, where it was not something like Pascal's thinglike *moi*, the term early moderns hit on was person.

Like the term subject, person plays on a number of registers. The OED gives nine main definitions, the second of which ("a human being") further subdivides to include eight distinct uses. The word's versatility explains why early moderns generally preferred it to the related notion of self with which it might otherwise be conflated.⁴⁹ The sense of self does of course colour many occurrences of the word person since active and articulate self-awareness was (and is) seen to distinguish human beings from other animals. The sense of self is moreover closely tied to person's use to denote conscious inwardness, one's private, "inner" self: what we are in ourselves, truly and sincerely, even when the individual so experienced is full of evasions, hesitations, and lies.

This use of the term is reflected in the third of the OED's general definitions: "The self, being, or individual personality of a man or woman, esp. as

distinct from his or her occupation, works, etc.” The importance of the distinction the OED stresses here bears closely on Sganarelle’s heated response to his master’s misanthropy. In defending the Piconian dignity he shares with all human beings, no matter how lowly and inconsequential, Sganarelle asserts his personal self-worth as being something more than and sharply different from his assigned role as Don Juan’s clownish servant. But this in turn underscores self’s fundamentally reflexive character. Sganarelle is after all driven to affirm his sense of personal identity and worth by his master’s callousness. A similar rebound supplies the structure for the fragment (Sellier 567) in which Pascal most fully formulates his picture of *le moi* by giving it the form of the question (“Qu’est-ce que le moi?”) mentioned earlier: a question prompted by disappointment at discovering that other people do not love us in the way we want them to – for instance, even following an attack of smallpox that disfigures our faces or a stroke that destroys our mental faculties.⁵⁰ Self is accordingly a point to which we return in reaction to our multiform engagement in the outer world, and even with ourselves in our capacity as outwardly directed beings responding to the obstacles and hurts encountered in daily life.

To be a person in the sense of being or having a self is thus a kind of double-take, arising when we step back from the world and the part we play in it. Self’s reflexive character relates to the notion’s deep connection to dramatic soliloquy. Person in this sense is a way of withdrawing from the course of events in order to speak out in self-discovery as an expression of one’s irreducible singularity. It is in this light that person comes to be identified with the settled sense of psychological continuity that has preoccupied English-language philosophy since Locke’s analysis of the role memory plays in securing personal identity over time. The Lockean settlement was soon deranged by Hume’s picture of self as a random bundle of impressions, sentiments, and ideas deprived of stable unity of any clearly demonstrable sort. Nevertheless, in Bernard Williams, Derek Parfit, or Hilary Putnam, the analytic tradition continues to pose the problem of person as revolving around the question of whether or not, as Parfit puts it, self is some separate, deeper, and enduring fact impervious to the freaks of psychological accident and change. Even when under sceptical attack of the kind Hume and Parfit launch, person is a matter of immediate inner experience as deeply felt and inherently private as it may be unstable and unreal.⁵¹

But beyond designating what one is as a matter of inner nature or a more or less illusory sense of psychic continuity, person refers to the body.⁵² It is already revealing that when we say that someone is a “good” or “bad” or a “nice” or “troublesome” person, we refer not only to the kind of person he or she is as a matter of inner character but to their quasi-physical impact on those around

them. It is in this same general sense that we may lay hands on someone's person or describe someone as having a "pretty" or "prepossessing" person. Person is thus the bodily as well as the inner or moral being. Such is what the narrator of Marie-Madeleine Pioche de La Vergne, comtesse de Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves* (1678) has in mind when the *reine dauphine* commands that a series of miniature portraits be painted of "all of the beautiful persons at court," meaning in the first instance those who looked good to the exclusion of those who failed to.⁵³

But looking good or bad is not merely a matter of possessing the kind of physical attributes a given community identifies as "personable" or attractive, important though this is. It is also a matter of demeanour, deportment, and the care one takes over one's physical appearance in terms of hygiene, dress, or cosmetics. What Lafayette's novel calls *une belle personne* includes then the way in which a given person presents him or herself to others in public as well as intimate gatherings. The physical person is already a social being at the intersection of inner and outer appearance and behaviour, and so at the point of contact between what one is in and for oneself and how others perceive us. It is in fact both inner and outer at once and indissociably. This in turn sheds light on the fact that when someone lays hands on someone else's person by seizing or slapping it, it is experienced not only as an act of direct physical violence but as a violation of one's simultaneously public and private identity. A slap is an affront as well as an injury, an invasion of a private space that is also a public possession and a public right: a fact all the more powerfully felt in an often punitively hierarchical social order like that of early modernity, where social superiors enjoyed the privilege of striking those over whom they lorded – children, wives, servants, peasants, and even artisans or merchants.⁵⁴

The matter of right relates to another circumstance to which Lafayette's novel draws attention: the degree to which the word person serves as an honorific, a fact already detected in the OED definition of person as "a human being." As we will see in [chapter 6](#), when we take up the *Princesse* at length, not everyone in Lafayette's world gets to be called a person. Servants, notably, are invariably referred to as *nos gens*, those nameless people who facelessly attend to the main characters' needs and wishes. To be a person here accordingly demands having an acknowledged social as well as moral stature, drawing just the kind of invidious distinction Sganarelle resents in token of the ever-broadening sense of who counts as a full-blown human being. In another literary work to which we will turn later, Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fayre* (1614), the promiscuous mixing of persons of widely contrasting social standing in a street market not only degrades the upper-caste people in attendance by subjecting them to the

levelling impact of the process of monetary exchange. It also, and correlatively, imbues their lower-caste companions with a sharply drawn visibility that challenges presumptions of the sort Lafayette takes for granted.

Etymology further underscores person's status as a public as well as private identity – as in fact both at once. As Hobbes reminds us, the word originates in the Latin *persona*, itself derived from the Greek *prosopon*, meaning the mask a stage actor held before his face to make his character legible to the audience.⁵⁵ Person is thus intimately connected to the idea of playing a part: a commonplace of period courtesy manuals that admonished neophytes to be mindful of the “personage” appropriate to the station in which they found themselves at court.⁵⁶ There is also the word's forensic use and the way this folded back into the sense of person at large. Locke provides the *locus classicus* in this context, defining person not only as the fruit of private memory but as someone capable of assuming public, and so legal, responsibility for his or her actions.⁵⁷ Children, idiots, or the mad were not in his view properly persons in that they were unable to enter into binding contracts and could not be held legally liable for deeds that, in the ordinary way, would be regarded as torts or crimes.

And to Locke's pregnant application of the categories of the common law to defining person should be added Hobbes's use of the term in *Leviathan's* (1651) analysis of political authority (111–15). Hobbes aims to identify who has the right of sovereign decision in the state, urging that there can be only one sovereign to whom all citizens or subjects delegate their private right of self-government in order to secure peace. To do so, he analyses the phenomenon of political personation. In the bleak description of the “state of nature” depicting the horrors that attend the lack of sovereign authority, Hobbes sees each person (if such a thing could be said to exist in that state) as exercising sovereign sway over his or her own actions. The result is the notorious “war of everyman against everyman” he takes to characterize the natural human condition. Whence what the Weimar-era German jurist Carl Schmitt calls the mysterious (and historically untraceable) “spark of reason” in which a coherent political community spontaneously forms when its members designate some one of their number as sovereign over all others.⁵⁸ But the sovereign so defined is not simply that private individual in whom the community invests sovereign authority: he or she is the community *in person*, that is, as the plenipotentiary representative entitled to decide on everyone's behalf.

Hobbes's political person has complex roots. It draws, for example, on the labours of medieval canon and civil lawyers, famously chronicled in a book we will return to in later chapters, Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies*, to define the legal status of forms of corporate identity (a guild, a state, a university, the Church) and the way these were made manifest in the persons of

duly appointed representatives. Hobbes's theory of political personation also tacitly draws on person's use in Christian theology, where it stands for each of the three hypostases of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵⁹ To be sure, as both Hobbes and his medieval predecessors understood, person in this sense is a legal fiction, not least because, though the sovereign decides, the legal "author" of the decisions he or she makes is the people he or she personates (114). Still, the more general sense of person that underwrites the fiction shows it to be a model for person as such. To be a person is to be one's own plenipotentiary, and so to represent oneself in the world as the responsible author of one's words, actions, and choices. And the theological implication of a sense of hypostatic union behind a multiplicity of distinct manifestations or avatars deepens the formal dignity bestowed in this way.

The combined notions of public authority and hypostatic union shed fresh light on the moral value attached to one's person even in a physical sense: what gives us the right as well as the natural propensity to resent slaps, slights, and insults. Which is why in the period – even if not especially, as Hélène Merlin-Kajman argues, in absolutist France – the notion of sovereignty technically reserved for the monarch increasingly shaped the picture of person in general, reaching as far down the social ladder as Molière's Sganarelle, offended as well as frightened by his master's cynical misanthropy.⁶⁰ Hobbes is adamant: there is, and can be, only one sovereign; for the moment there are two, as in a state like the civil-war England of *Behemoth* (1668), where religious factions felt empowered to resist monarchic authority by alleging the higher authority of God, there is no sovereign at all. Yet the logic that led him to portray the sovereign as a person still illustrates the direction in which the underlying phenomenon of personhood was experienced, and so evolved.

6. Early Modern Persons and the Experiment of Self

In joining early moderns in using the word person as the term of choice for what we tend today to call "subject" or self, we gain a clearer grasp of the multidimensional sense of human individuals they entertained even when, in Shakespearean soliloquy or Cartesian meditation, their gazes appeared to turn most acutely inward. But we also equip ourselves to read the texts and images they produced more fully by seeing in them the, in every sense, experimental happenings they were.

We return to Sganarelle's botched defence of the dignity attached to even so paltry a creature as himself. The exchange opens with a catechism: reminded of doctrine by his doctor's robe, Sganarelle quizzes his master in order to elicit what are supposed to be rote responses. The quiz initiates a series of tests to

which both characters are put. Don Juan refuses to give the answers Sganarelle expects, driving his servant to a proof of God's existence from design that leads nowhere. The world may not have sprung up overnight like a mushroom, and the human body may well be composed of many ingenious "contrivances." Yet the only evidence that could help decide how the world came to be is furnished by the world itself in its natural facticity; and however ingenious they may be, the very contrivances that bespeak the human body's powers show it to be a machine. The result is Sganarelle's dismay at the underlying moral implications: if all we have is our body, and that body is a machine, what value do we possess beyond the sheer fact of material existence? He responds by citing the faculties of thought and free will. But this too must be tested, and the result is the dance that lands him on his nose. At which point Don Juan changes the subject, observing that "while reasoning, I believe we have lost our way," introducing the scene at the crossroads where he attempts to persuade the beggar they approach for directions to blaspheme in exchange for a gold sovereign (876).

Even this account does not exhaust the scene's lessons. Sganarelle is defeated: Don Juan's atheism prevails. Nor will the latter's descent to Hell in the denouement, complete with flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, change that fact. For of course this is all playacting and nobody goes anywhere. Yet things change just the same. Though he fails to defend it, Sganarelle discovers "something or other" in his head he is unwilling to part with. And his master brings himself, all unawares and yet in full view of the audience, to a moment of decision, a moment of truth. For the meeting with the beggar is the first of three scenes in which Don Juan might have saved his immortal soul: when, against all appearances, the beggar refuses to blaspheme, performing what looks like an act of simple piety; when, having rescued his armed pursuers from bandits in the woods and received in return a day in which to satisfy their demands, Don Juan refuses to honour the promise of marriage to their sister; and when confronted with the evidence of the murdered commander's animated statue, a "miracle" in which Don Juan testily insists he sees a mere trick of atmospheric light. Covering the central portions of act three, where neoclassical dramaturgy placed the fulcrum of events destined to a tragic end, these scenes seal Don Juan's fate – but only because he is publicly shown to choose the damnation to which legend predestines him, thereby convicting himself of the villainy that damns his soul.

We find ourselves then in an experimental space, as witnesses to a series of empirical manipulations and the events they make happen. True, these are pseudo-events. This is still only playacting, and Don Juan chooses nothing: the actor in the role merely recites his lines. And yet something real has happened all the same. The true experiment consists less of what purports to take place onstage

than of the effect it produces in the audience: how we take up what we see and hear, the emotions we feel, the novel (and disturbing) ideas we are led to entertain. Something has happened, and changed; and the outcome tells us something we had not known before, if only about our own emotions and characters.

But what is true of Molière's *Don Juan* proves equally so of early modern artworks generally, especially when we give the word art its original sense, as denoting less the high-minded aesthetic fictions of post-Kantian theory than the productions of human artifice at large, whatever shape they take. To compose a poem, paint a picture, publish a treatise, fashion an argument, or put on a play is to frame an experience for the readers, beholders, scholars, disputants, and theatre-goers to whom they are addressed. The upshot – just what and how all of these people experience the work set before them – will be decided by the event: as in Boyle's experiments with his air-pump, the result cannot be pre-determined, however shrewdly the outcome may be guessed. But, more than that, the experience brought about by these means goes on to produce effects of its own. To sit through *Don Juan*, read Descartes's *Meditations*, or watch the closely monitored rise of mercury in a tube set in the glass receiver attached to Boyle's air-pump is to be changed in ways that both reveal new facts about self and world unobserved before and alter those facts by subjecting them to the manipulations required to bring them to light. What is more, the facts illuminated in this way provoke further changes still as we weigh them not only in our minds but in the world of practical affairs we share with others – and nowhere more incontrovertibly than when the subject in question takes the form of a person. For, as early moderns increasingly discovered, person too is an experiment, a precipitate of the processes of trial and error through which it comes to know itself.

7. Outline of the Book

The following chapters put the notion of experimental selves to the test through a series of case studies drawn from a wide variety of cultural and disciplinary contexts.

The first two chapters fill out the picture of the early modern experiment of person from the standpoint of its relation to epistemology. [Chapter 1](#), “The Shape of Knowledge: The Culture of Experiment and the Byways of Expression,” focuses on the experiment's consequences for the pursuit of knowledge and the corresponding impact changes in knowledge had on the experience of self. In elaborating what remain the basic protocols of modern experimental science by incorporating the forms in which embodied persons actively acquire such knowledge as they possess, Boyle gave the inductive program championed in

Bacon's *New Organon* (1620) the practical means that had eluded his great predecessor. However, as Barbara Shapiro noted some time ago, Boyle's practice of natural science also deeply modified Bacon's model. In particular, the successes it achieved paradoxically persuaded its adepts to abandon the quest for absolute certainty enshrined in the basic notion of knowledge itself from antiquity down to the early modern era.⁶¹

A first outcome was what Ian Hacking has described as the shift from a representational theory of knowledge to one grounded in practical intervention.⁶² Where the aim had been to grant the sprawl of natural experience the systematic coherence of the kind of universal spectacle the rationalist Descartes still felt demanded of him in his early *Treatise on the World* (1630; published posthumously in 1677), intellectual mastery of reality increasingly came to be seen as a mode of empirical work, a direct physical as well as mental engagement with the world in its material autonomy. We accordingly witness the emergence of what Shapiro calls a "culture of fact" in which propositions came to be tested against forms of evidence that were deliberately produced by artificial means.

The result however was not merely the emergence of the kind of heartless instrumental mastery in which commentators like Theodor Adorno, Charles Taylor, or Giorgio Agamben lament the roots of modern Western alienation from self and world alike.⁶³ Nor was it what we have come to think of as "subjective" imprisonment in thought-worlds of our own making.

One of my aims here is to extend and refine the insights achieved since the 1990s by the at once empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated exploration of the social and cultural contexts of early modern art, thought, and writing: an enterprise typified by the history of early modern science in Paolo Rossi, Lorraine Daston, Katherine Parker, and Steven Shapin as well as in writers I have already cited like Hacking, Shapiro, and Dear. It will be obvious how deeply I am in their debt. Yet the very successes these scholars score have also generated confusion by creating the impression that period culture cut its inhabitants off from the bedrock realities early modern poets, painters, and virtuosi imagined they had uncovered – that early moderns were in fact sleepwalkers guided by the evil genius of ideology and by underlying material imperatives they were unable to recognize or control. Over against this view, I argue in this chapter that early modern experimental science in particular was a mode of dialectical interaction in which, precisely because the persons involved were experimental beings of the sort my introduction portrays, self and world at once defined and shaped each other to an effect bilaterally expressive of both. Understanding the world thus involves understanding ourselves – not however in Cartesian wise, as something fundamentally separate from the order of physical nature, but rather as a telltale natural expression of the world we seek to comprehend.

To develop a sharper picture of the bilaterally expressive character of the world as early moderns learned to perceive it, we turn in the next chapter to the evidence supplied by visual art. [Chapter 2](#), “The Art of the Inside Out: Vision and Expression in Hoogstraten’s London *Peepshow*,” recalls the close collaboration between painting and science, especially (though by no means exclusively) in the mercantile north. Of special relevance is the quasi-Baconian “art of describing” that Svetlana Alpers memorably discerns in the landscapes, street scenes, genre vignettes, and architectural paintings of the Dutch Golden Age. Seventeenth-century Dutch descriptiveness was not just a matter of the unparalleled realism Dutch painters brought to depicting the world in which they lived in terms of the subjects they chose to paint and the techniques they used to paint them. They adopted a philosophy of art that Alpers rightly links to the visual program formulated by Boyle’s associate Robert Hooke in the preface to his *Micrographia* of 1665, a collection of densely annotated engravings illustrating the wonders seen through a microscope. In Hooke’s words, the goal was to conjoin the “sincere eye” of exact scientific observation with the “faithful hand” of artistic representation to produce a precise encyclopedic map of the visible world.⁶⁴ In pursuing this goal, moreover, Dutch painters engaged in ingenious experiments with the most up-to-date visual technologies of the day, including trompe-l’œil composition, catoptric and dioptric lenses, and *camerae obscurae* – all of it perhaps most vividly on display in the perspective boxes of Rembrandt’s sometime pupil, the peripatetic polymath Samuel van Hoogstraten.

The chapter centres on detailed analysis of the Hoogstraten *Peepshow* of c. 1655–60, a box in the National Gallery in London. By compelling the beholder to peer into the box’s concealed interior along narrowly focused sightlines fixed in two of its corners, Hoogstraten creates remarkable effects of intricately interlocking three-dimensional spaces. Further, because it is a box rather than a panel or canvas, the pictures it contains mimic not only the external world as accessible to natural vision but the mental work of vision itself – the processes by which the brain converts what contemporary optics had already shown to be the reversed two-dimensional images that strike the retina into coherent reproductions of the upright three-dimensional objects from which mediating light rays carry them. The box thereby models the generation of the “ideas” lodged in our heads that period psychology took to be the real as opposed to apparent objects of our perceptions. Looking inside the box becomes quite literally a matter of peering into one’s own brain in order to observe not merely the resemblance between the things we see and artful representations of them but their functional identity.

But does this mean, as sceptics might observe, that vision is essentially an illusion, as tenuous and misleading as those associated with art itself? Hoogstraten