

Introduction

The first question that a reader might reasonably have when opening this volume is: What do you mean by personal object? As it turns out, that is a very good question. It is also a very difficult question to answer—difficult enough to prompt us to create this volume. There is no single English term that encapsulates the whole of this concept; and different terms are liable to introduce different misunderstandings. I have chosen to call these experiences of “personal” objects because the word “personal” retains its connection to the concept of “person”—put succinctly, we wish to discuss “objects” (or at least, experiences usually labelled as objective) that are also persons. Depending on the case, these objects might be understood to truly be person in the fullest sense, or they may be objects that are metaphorically “person-like,” at least enough so as to be philosophically interesting. In other words, these objects might literally be a person in the full personalist sense (whether understood as possessing Kantian dignity, or various other conceptions of person). Or they might be understood as possessing a “persona” or a “personality” that gives them an aura unlike other objects.

The downside of choosing the term “personal” (as opposed to “vital objects” or “anthropomorphized” or similar) is that to the modern English speaker the term might connote “possession.” For example: that car is my personal property. While there is an interesting relationship between private property and personal objects (see for example chapter 13 of this volume), we do not want to limit our conversation to just this sense of the term. Somewhat closer to our usage is the sense of “personal” as a marker of importance and value: this car is personal for me because it was my mother’s. Why are certain objects more personal to us than others? Why do we so often give names to our cars (and ships, and weapons, and so on)? How is the experience of a personal object distinct from experiences of other objects? Personal objects are present in nearly every culture (as this volume will demonstrate), and they play a powerful role in our experience of the world. Further, these objects often have important cultural

and sociological functions: whether religious, economic, ethical, aesthetic, or political. However, philosophy has not done an adequate job in addressing this aspect of the human experience.

The narrative of “modern” philosophy since Descartes, at least as it is commonly understood, has been the story of increasing dominance by a certain form of scientific and mathematical understanding of the world—an understanding that has taken a certain view of subjects and objects, which prioritizes quantifiable (mathematizable and measurable) articulations of experience. The benefits of this worldview have been great, but the detriments have at times been less emphasized. Questions concerning our Cartesian heritage (a broad term I take to mean not just Descartes but the style of philosophy that followed him) proliferated in the twentieth century: such questions were brought to crisis by the tragedies of the two world wars and the Cold War.

Now we live in a transitional time in which the dominance of that modern worldview has tilted (which is not to say that it does not remain incredibly influential). We are not yet sure if it will right itself, or if something new will rise in its place. It is not enough simply to critique the tradition or lose ourselves in skepticism; either solutions must be offered, or alternatives must be proposed. In the midst of this struggle, large sections of the academy are either struggling for new worldviews to articulate, or seeking to look back and reclaim something of what has been covered up by the dominance of Cartesian “modernism.”

It is in the spirit of both of these efforts that we have written this volume. Ironically, science itself has already in many ways outgrown “modern” philosophy—modern philosophy has failed to keep up. More critically, however, human cultures (especially Western European dominated cultures) have also failed to keep up. While work has been progressing on quantum physics and non-Euclidean geometries for over a century, culture at large is still firmly Cartesian. The effects of that influence are not aging well.

This volume attempts to broaden and reinvigorate our understanding of cultural meaning and experience. Personal objects—objects with significant cultural value (with personality)—are a class that cannot be understood from the standpoint of the dominant mathematized modern worldview. And yet, experiences of this sort are incredibly pervasive and appear throughout almost every culture. Most readers are bound to recognize their own experiences in depictions of different personal objects: for example, your grandfather’s watch is not just any watch. It has a personality that other (even materially identical) watches do not.

These experiences cannot be denied, and yet they also cannot be accommodated by the dominant cultural form. As a result, work is necessary either to adapt the dominant form or propose alternative forms of understanding. That is

precisely what this volume seeks to do. Some authors look to existing or historical cultures for examples, while other authors propose new systems of cultural thought. Many chapters in the volume feature some blend of both approaches.

This volume has three aims. The first aim is simply to articulate what it means to have an experience of a personal object—so that readers can recognize this experience in their own lives. The second aim is to provide an overview of some historically or culturally significant examples of personal objects. While it is impossible to provide a complete listing of culturally significant personal objects, we have provided a representative sample that draws from geographically and historically diverse sources. The third aim of the volume is to provide a variety of theoretical frameworks that can help the reader to understand the existence and purpose of personal objects. These interpretative positions are varied: some argue for the positive value of personal objects, and others are less optimistic.

Nearly every article in the volume contributes in some way to our first aim: providing descriptions of the experience of personal objects. For that reason, we have not provided a separate section dedicated solely toward that aim. Instead, the volume has been divided into two major sections, roughly in accordance with our second and third aims (historical and theoretical, respectively). Thus part 1, “Traditional Accounts,” features articles that primarily articulate and reflect on personal objects that have appeared in various historical cultures and times. Part 2, “New Perspectives,” contains articles whose primary purpose is to provide new philosophical frameworks from which to understand the experience of personal objects.

It is important to note that while some articles fit relatively easily into this artificial division, almost every article features at least some blend of these two aims. Certain articles could easily have been placed in either category; some subjective decisions had to be made in order to decide which aim (historical or theoretical) any particular chapter was most engaged with. Thus, the reader should be sure to understand that chapters in part 1 often have significant theoretical value, while chapters in part 2 are often carefully situated in cultural and historical contexts.

The chapters internal to part 1 have been arranged roughly “historically” (in a broad sense), with objects with a long tradition of personalization (natural objects, ships, religious objects, weapons) followed by more recent traditions and contexts (for example in Native American and modern American cultures). The chapters internal to part 2 begin with a set of four chapters that are more general in scope, providing broad philosophical reflections on the topic of personal objects and serving as a starting point for our theoretical perspectives. The final six chapters tackle more specific issues, with two chapters on economic themes, two chapters on aesthetic (musical) themes, and the final two chapters dealing

with the ethics of human (and robot) bodies. Each chapter will begin with an editorial note to provide context on the place of the work within the overall volume—hopefully, this will help to keep the reader orientated and give a sense of how it contributes to the project as a whole.

In chapter 1, Pete A.Y. Gunter discusses the mystery that is a subregion of East Texas called the Big Thicket. If it were a swamp (like the Everglades) or a mountain chain (like the Smokies) there would be no problem. What is a plant growth community or, more inclusively, an ecosystem? Are they simply aggregates of individual plants and/or animals? Or are they, as some have argued, organisms? In summary, he is asking if an entire ecosystem can have personality.

In chapter 2, Marc M. Anderson argues that personality is the result of certain acts, vocal and visible, which transform the average human into something that is not the average—transformation *toward* something divine. He argues that the tendencies toward personality (which he enumerates) that are at work on the human level are also at work on the level of nonhuman objects, and the best example of that is seagoing ships.

In chapter 3, Martin Pehal discusses how, for the ancient Egyptians, certain objects (such as statues, mummies, etc.) could in certain contexts (temple and funerary rituals) be animated by powers or entities that would enter into or interact with them. In order to outline the context of such a worldview, he first explains the basic principles of ancient Egyptian thought as reflected in the rules governing their scriptural tradition—hieroglyphics. He then outlines the basic concepts of the *ka* and *ba*—constituent elements of “personhood” in a very broad sense as it also concerned deities. The final part of the essay is devoted to the description of the rituals that activated this transference.

In chapter 4, John August explores one way in which a special mode of cognition (the mode of cognition that judges persons as such), can transform the relation between the cognizer and the cognized so that a new horizon of possibility opens up to the cognizer. Specifically, he inquires into the development of the relationship between the Brahminical devotionalist and the divine object, that is, the divine image as embodied in some medium, such as a statue, painting, or some other depiction of the divine.

In chapter 5, Kevin Taylor focuses on the personality of Japanese objects such as *tsukumogami*. It is therefore a paper on *kami*; it is his hope that this topic will problematize those who, in his research, write “there is no personalism in Japan.” He aims to demonstrate that the ways in which we treat objects as alive enrich and reorient our praxis to intensify personal experience.

In chapter 6, Alan Maisey argues that throughout history the object that has probably had the closest connection with any man has been that man’s personal weapon. More than 1000 years ago in the Island of Java, a weapon known as a *keris* (or *kris*) appeared that became perhaps the ultimate expression of what

a personal object can become. Maisey outlines the history of this weapon and how it became so central to Javanese culture.

In chapter 7, Carrie McLachlan discusses the idea of nonhuman persons in Cherokee traditions. She focuses her discussion on two types of Cherokee nonhuman persons who fit into two categories of person for the Cherokee: they are both this world and “sky” world persons. She examines a mid-eighteenth-century document that establishes the identity of the Cherokee “Corn Mother” as simultaneously an earth and sky being. Then she suggests that other nonhuman persons also fit this category and offers as an example the Cherokee River (Long Person, Yvwi Gunahita).

In chapter 8, Sasha L. Biro utilizes the work of Georges Bataille as a lens through which to critically examine the economy of the quilt, whereby as blanket it serves a utilitarian function as project object, but later it becomes more than just object, taking on cultural power as a personalized narrative experience. The quilt is a tangible and tactile object that also holds and transmits personal memories.

In chapter 9, the first chapter of part 2, Michael Jackson explores the existential conditions under which things *appear*, by turns, inert or vital, objects or subjects. Drawing on traditions as diverse as object relation theory and Marxism, Jackson shows what motivates humans to treat their environment as personalized. However, he argues that personalized experience should be understood as a defense against the unresponsiveness of matter in an age when our waning powers to sustain life on earth make this issue more vexed than it may have ever been before.

In chapter 10, Dwayne Tunstall investigates the phenomenological sense of constituting personal objects from the perspectives of an unapologetic idealist, Josiah Royce. Tunstall contends that there are phenomenological clues in Royce’s theory and the resulting account of individuality that we can use to formulate a phenomenological account for how we constitute personal objects and, by extension, constitute our world.

In chapter 11, Jared Kemling provides a phenomenology (in the spirit of Ernst Cassirer) of the way in which personalized experience becomes intuitive (i.e., assumes spatiality, temporality, and numerality). He argues that personalized experience spatializes in a mode of “responsibility,” that it temporalizes in a mode of “hope,” and that it numeralizes in a mode of “community.” Each of these modes has a dynamic tension between integrative and differential movements. While outlining his phenomenology, Kemling discusses several concrete examples of personal objects, including: a wedding ring, and the character of Alice from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*.

In chapter 12, James McLachlan delineates the similarities and differences between Levinas’s and Sartre’s approaches to possession and personal objects and how the relation to the object does not constitute the otherness of the face. By

tracing both Sartre and Levinas's responses to Descartes, he shows the difficulty of understanding objects as fully "person" for both thinkers.

In chapter 13, Helen Grela considers whether, as a society, we might have unwittingly turned money into a person (as Marx implies) and ourselves into its corporeal embodiment. To do so, she explores how our social imaginary is based on certain flawed or inconsistent concepts that both obscure and enable such a reality. These concepts include: our reflexive beliefs that money is a naturally arising and neutral tool in economic transactions; that our economic system protects the universality of natural rights of life, liberty and property; and that our legal system supports our common understanding of the person as the bearer of these universal rights.

In chapter 14, Randall Auxier discusses how King Philip's War was the deadliest in North American history, so far as records extend. Lying at the base of this war was the collapse of the wampum economy that had been adapted to the needs of poorly supplied colonizers in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay. This odd cultural institution of wampum fulfills political, economic, religious, artistic and even legal roles (especially as they affect rituals of war and peace). Auxier argues that wampum was "person" in a higher sense than any individual or even any single community. Unfortunately, it would not yield to the pressures of quantification that even the rudimentary Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay forms of economy required.

In chapter 15, Ralph D. Ellis discusses the uncanny personality of his piano and ties this unique instrument into a larger conversation about jazz music, hermeneutics, ambiguity, and the "focusing method" of Eugene Gendlin. He argues that his piano literally mirrors Gendlin's focusing process: in the sense that it does it in reverse.

In chapter 16, Eli Kramer discusses how, in 1870, Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813–1883) wrote an essay to celebrate the centennial of Beethoven's birth. In this essay, Wagner made the case that music is, unlike any other object we create or are attentive to in experience, in an immediate analogical relationship with the activity of the Schopenhauerian "will" and is always enlivened. By drawing on this idea, we can not only conceive of music as in an immediate analogical relationship with our personal experience, but as perhaps the only object of cognition that is in a constant state of personal vitality. It is by that very continuous vitality that it can return us to our own personhood with deeper insight and perspective. The chapter concludes by exploring how attending to the musical object as a spiritual (existential) exercise might reconnect us to our roots in *sensus communis*, educate us on our common personhood, and play an ethical role in our lives.

In chapter 17, Laura J. Mueller investigates the link between the sublime moral *person* and personalized *objects* of the world around us. Using Kant's

foundational argument on philosophical personhood and the criteria thereof (intersubjectivity and self-consciousness), she argues that multiple kinds of personality derive from the philosophical person, including object-personality and personal-personality. Cultural objects are, she argues, objects formed by intersubjectivity but without self-consciousness, thus giving them a special status of personality. She concludes by examining the role of mythic thought in this formation of personality, using a Cassireran methodology.

In chapter 18, Charles Harvey presents and reflects upon rapidly evolving developments in human-robot relations. He argues that psychological, phenomenological, and neuro-physiological evidence suggests that our new media-saturated environment is eroding the human capacity for deep and prolonged concentration, empathy, and attachment. As machines become more human-like, humans become more machine-like: objects become more personal, and persons become more objectified. This sets the stage for diminished relations between humans.

Jared Kemling
December, 2021