

THE PROOF OF GOD AND THE POSSIBILITY OF MATERIALISM IN LOCKE'S *ESSAY*

DAN HICKS

1

In chapter ten of book four of his *Essay concerning human understanding*, John Locke gives an argument for the existence of a cognitive, immaterial first cause¹, which runs (in summation) as follows:

- (1) I, a thinking thing, exist
- (2) Nothing comes from nothing
- (3) ∴ (1, 2) There is some first cause
- (4) Perfections must lie in their cause
- (5) ∴ (3,4) This first cause must be the most powerful being
- (6) Nothing knowing can come from something unknowing
- (7) ∴ (1,3,6) This first cause must be knowing

Locke seems to give arguments for (6) at three places in chapter ten: first, a brief argument, in section five, not much more than a mere assertion; and a second, longer argument, in sections nine through eleven; and, third, while considering the possibility that the first cause is a material being, in sections sixteen and seventeen. This last, especially, is at least *prima facie* in conflict with the possibility of materialism:

For unthinking Particles of Matter, however put together, can have nothing thereby added to them, but a new relation of Position, which 'tis impossible should give thought and knowledge to them If it be the motion of its parts, on which its Thinking depends, all the Thoughts there must be unavoidably accidental, and limited; since all the Particles that by Motion cause Thought . . . cannot . . . be regulated by the Thought of the whole; since that Thought is not the cause of Motion . . . but the

¹As per Kant's critique of the cosmological proof for the existence of a God in *The only possible proof*, the entity whose existence Locke's proof (purports) to demonstrate is not necessarily anything more than a first cause or creator-deity, much less than the traditional Christian God. Hence, I use the term 'first cause' here, rather than 'God' or 'god'.

consequence of it So that such a thinking Being will be no better or wiser, than pure blind Matter². . . .

Indeed, these passages are used by Margaret Wilson³ and Matthew Stuart⁴ to conclude that Locke rejected materialism. But this seems to contradict certain statements of agnosticism about materialism Locke makes earlier in book four:

We have the *Ideas* of *Matter* and *Thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know, whether any mere material Being thinks, or no since we know not wherein Thinking consists, nor to what sort of Substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that Power⁵. . . .

Michael Ayers⁶ has interpreted these passages in a way which he believes avoids the apparent contradiction. But I believe, even given Ayers' interpretation, the *Essay* contains an unavoidable contradiction between these two sections.

2

Ayers' interpretation is framed as a response to Wilson's interpretation of 4.10.16-7, but as Wilson simply takes these at face value as rejections of materialism, and her primary concern is Locke's mechanist credentials, I shall concern myself primarily with Ayers. The crucial point in his interpretation of chapter 10 is that Locke is here concerned only with the *origins* of cognition, and these anti-materialism arguments apply exclusively to the first cause:

It is significant that he more than once says that what is impossible is the *genesis* of thought in a postulated eternal matter [The argument in 4.10.10], as it stands, is clearly neutral on the question whether *finite* "cognitive beings" are in the nature of things immaterial. Just as the being and motion of matter, because they do not derive from the essence of matter, require an external cause or source, so the thinking hypothetically ascribed for the sake of argument to eternal and eternally moving matter would require an external cause or source.⁷

²Locke, 1689/1975, 627

³Wilson, 1979

⁴Stuart, 1998

⁵Locke, 1689/1975, 541, his emphasis

⁶Ayers, 1981

⁷Ayers, 1981, 243, his emphasis

Hence, Ayers thinks, Locke is safe from contradiction on this point: The first cause might, as Locke says, ‘superadd to Matter a Faculty of Thinking’⁸, even if it itself is necessarily not physical, so materialism is still possible. ‘The external cause must be an architect, but need not perform miracles.’⁹

But let’s unpack just what an agnosticism about materialism should amount to. Let me abbreviate the following thesis as $\diamond M$, for the possibility of materialism: there is a possible configuration of fundamental mechanist particles – a material mode – A such that, were A to be actualized (in whatever fashion, mechanically/accidentally or through divine intervention), the result would be a cognitive being. What comes to the same thing, we might also say that there is a possible cognitive being A whose real essence is exhausted by the nominal essence of matter, viz, solidity and extension. One might reject this definition of materialism as too restrictive, interpreting ‘superaddition’ as instead an arbitrary ‘attachment’ of cognitive ability to an otherwise strictly material being; or, more generally, taking materialism to include cognitive beings whose real essence includes, but is not limited to, the nominal essence of matter. But I do not see how this can be construed as materialism in contrast to dualism: to my mind, dualism about humans simply amounts to the thesis that our real essence includes, but is not limited to, the nominal essence of matter. This proposed weaker materialism seems to be a materialism any dualist would be happy with. Furthermore, Locke’s target in 4.10.10 and 16-7 is the possibility of the stronger materialism for the first cause, so these arguments apply to the stronger version. Alternatively, one could simply reject the thesis that Locke was really agnostic about materialism; but then his particular expression of agnosticism in 4.3.6 (only ‘fitly disposed systems of matter’, not arbitrary systems of matter) would require some interpretation; and, of course, there would also be no point to either my paper or Ayers’, insofar as the latter is trying to resolve an apparent contradiction. Recall that I am arguing that Ayers’ resolution of the apparent contradiction does not work.

Hence I take the possibility considered in $\diamond M$ as a definition of materialism: one can qualify as a materialist if and only if one affirms the adequacy of the mode A , even if one cannot give any further details about it; it does not seem as though one could be a materialist and hold anything weaker. I thus read Locke as affirming $\diamond M$, at least as an epistemic thesis, in 4.6.3; but it should be clear in what follows that

⁸Locke, 1689/1975, 541

⁹Ayers, 1981, 243

this is all I need – either the proof in 4.10 is undermined, or we know enough to deny $\diamond M$.

Now, returning to Ayers. As explained above, he reads sections 4.10.10 and 16-7 of the *Essay* as only concerning the first cause: a strictly material cognitive being is possible, as in $\diamond M$, but the unguided motions of mindless particles alone cannot actualize A (or any other purely material cognitive being); hence the first cause, being uncreated, cannot be purely material. However, this ‘argument’ is little more than a bare assertion, at best supported only in section ten by the ‘perfections’ argument¹⁰. More importantly for our purposes here, however, is that the anti-materialist arguments Locke gives in these sections can clearly be read to apply to all cognitive beings, whether or not Locke wanted them to be read that way. The argument as it is written is not unique to the first cause, and an anti-materialist can readily take it up for their own cause. Context won’t save Locke here; one simply must follow Wilson and Stuart in reading these sections as general anti-materialist arguments, even if they’re not intended to be such.

At the same time, there seems to be no reason other than the ‘perfections’ argument to believe, given $\diamond M$, that a strictly material cognitive being such as A could not come about as a highly unlikely but not impossible result of accidental, that is, ‘blind and unguided’, motion; even more, the definition of $\diamond M$ I gave above clearly implies that A could come about entirely accidentally in an entirely material universe. A might become aware of strong probabilities against its existence, and conclude that there probably was some supernatural entity that created it, but this is no demonstration of the *necessity* of a creator entity. Also, note that our lack of knowledge about A doesn’t matter: this would be knowledge of whether the mode A is adequate, ie, consistent, but merely admitting that A might be possible undermines the certainty of (6), independent of Ayers’ point about the ‘perfections’ argument.

This contradiction creates even more problems for the other conclusions of Locke’s proof. If, as I have claimed, $\diamond M$ and (6) contradict each other, and (4) (the general ‘perfections’ argument) serves as ground for both (6) and (5) (the conclusion that the first cause is the most powerful being in existence), then $\diamond M$ also undermines Locke’s argument for

¹⁰Further, Ayers (Ayers, 1981, 250) points out how this argument either makes Locke’s proof circular or becomes highly probably belief, not knowledge (Stuart makes a similar point; see below).

the supreme power of the first cause, and even makes (2) ('from nothing, nothing comes') questionable. Stuart¹¹ uses this last point to argue against a purely epistemological agnosticism about materialism: if (6) is merely a probabilistic argument, eg, '*Almost without doubt*, nothing knowing can come into existence spontaneously', then we must add a similar qualification to the parallel claim about matter, and the proof is an even less solid demonstration of the first cause's existence; as at the end of the last paragraph, this epistemological agnosticism undermines the demonstrative certainty Locke wants for the existence of the first cause.

3

Thus it seems Locke has written himself into a bit of a bind. Let me consider two interpretations which attempt to resolve this conflict, but I do not believe are successful. The first is common to Wilson and Stuart; on this view, Locke simply wasn't sympathetic to materialism: the arguments in 4.10 are, in fact, anti-materialist arguments, and the agnosticism Locke expresses in 4.3.6 is whether or not the first cause might have arbitrarily and 'supernaturally' glued the ability to think on to some purely material beings, eg, for all we know, the first cause might have just made a rock that could think. The problem is that, as I argued above, this 'materialism' is indistinguishable in any significant way from dualism. Moreover, this sort of radical, supernatural superaddition of cognitive ability to material beings doesn't seem to be what Locke has in mind by the term; in his correspondence with Stillingfleet¹², he illustrates superaddition by the way the first cause has superadded life and sensibility to plants and animals, without adding anything to them beyond their material configuration; his examples are not miraculous thinking rocks. Ayers' reading¹³ of 4.3.6, where the materialism Locke has in mind has a more-or-less contemporary, mechanist, feel to it, is much more appealing.

The other interpretation I wish to consider as a possible rebuttal attempts to clarify Locke's claims in the second half of 4.10 in his own terminology. Specifically, this interpretation asserts that Locke is merely arguing that the first cause's real essence must go beyond the nominal essence of matter. This narrowing of Locke's focus does seem to be compatible with his goal in the second half of 4.10, attacking the

¹¹Stuart, 1998, 366

¹²Locke, 1698/1823, 461-2

¹³Ayers, 1981, 229ff, 233

ideas of God attributed to Hobbes, et al; but I believe this interpretation doesn't actually help resolve the contradiction I'm considering here. The problem is not that Locke's conclusions are in need of clarification; rather, no matter how they're interpreted as a rejection of materialism for the first cause, $\Diamond M$ must be interpreted in a parallel way, and these same conclusions can be applied more generally to reject the possible material cognitive being A . To block such a generalization of the rejection of materialism, an argument must be given that there is 'something special' about the first cause; but none is given. In particular to this interpretation, even if Locke has shown the first cause's real essence necessarily surpasses the nominal essence of matter, his arguments can be applied more generally, to conclude that the real essence of any cogitative being necessarily surpasses the nominal essence of matter, contra $\Diamond M$. The two will inevitably clash so long as the anti-materialist arguments are not restricted to the first cause.

A successful rebuttal to my argument therefore requires a claim that Locke's arguments in 4.10 do not apply to all cogitative beings, or at least not to the possible material cognitive being A . But this requirement means no rebuttal to my argument can be given, as I now prove.

The first cause is defined precisely as that, the first cause; thus, any particular conclusions about it must derive from its uncaused status. Hence, to show A , the material configuration in $\Diamond M$, could not be the first cognitive being, a hypothetical rebuttal must have, at least as a corollary, that A cannot be uncaused, ie, can only be brought into existence by some other cogitative being. For, if this claim does not follow from the hypothetical rebuttal, then, as in the last interpretation, the arguments Locke gives in 4.10.16-7 apply to A , contra $\Diamond M$. In fact, to prevent an infinite regress, this corollary must be the stronger claim that A can only be brought into existence by a cogitative being which is not strictly material, ie, a cogitative being whose real essence goes beyond the nominal essence of matter. That is, a successful rebuttal must have, at least as a corollary, that $\Diamond M$ is only consistent with a universe which is not strictly material. But this is clearly false, as A is simply some configuration of basic particles in a possibly strictly material universe: the measure of the set of possible strictly material universes in which A occurs (roughly, the probability that a randomly chosen possible strictly material universe contains an actualization of A) is independent of the fact that the actualization of A is a cognitive being, and in particular is non-zero, given $\Diamond M$.

Hence no such rebuttal can be formulated.

Essentially, there are only two forms a potential rebuttal might take. First, one could weaken the sort of materialism Locke has in mind in

4.3.6, as Wilson and Stuart did. But I fail to see how this could be done, and still be considered materialism; as I said above, the version I've given in $\diamond M$ seems to me to be the most stripped-down form of materialism possible (alternatively, one must assent to $\diamond M$ to be considered at all agnostic about materialism). Second, one could try to argue that the configuration A could not arise accidentally; but as the last paragraph shows, this also contradicts $\diamond M$.

Hence, taking Locke's expressed agnosticism in 4.3.6 at face value, these two positions are necessarily in conflict with each other. I don't believe he himself sees the extent of the contradiction; he worries about it briefly in 4.3.6, but quickly reassures himself that there is no contradiction – by asserting that there is none – and moves on. Most likely Locke's own public inclinations towards dualism, and the general attitude prior to Darwin that 'clearly' highly organized systems of particles could not occur accidentally, made this reassurance rhetorically sufficient.

Ultimately, of course, the proof is a failure on its own grounds, independent of its conflict with other sections of the *Essay*. The specific conflict I have demonstrated in this paper is just one more reason why it should not have been included; the further question, which I cannot answer here, is why Locke did decide to keep such an obviously flawed argument through each of the editions of the book.

REFERENCES

- Ayers, M. (1981, April). Mechanism, superaddition, and the proof of God's existence in Locke's essay. *The Philosophical Review*, 90(2), 210-51.
- Locke, J. (1823). Mr. Locke's second reply to the Bishop of Worcester. In *The works of John Locke* (p. 460-471ff.). Thomas Davison. (Original work published 1698)
- Locke, J. (1975). *An essay concerning human understanding* (Clarendon ed.; P. H. Nidditch, Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1689)
- Stuart, M. (1998). Locke on superaddition and mechanism. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 6(3), 351-79.
- Wilson, M. D. (1979, April). Superadded properties: The limits of mechanism in Locke. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16(2), 143-150.