



# Stewart Duncan, "Materialism from Hobbes to Locke"

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**Stewart Duncan.** *Materialism from Hobbes to Locke.* Oxford University Press 2022. 248 pp. \$88.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780197613009).

This elegant volume makes a strong case for the historical importance, and intrinsic interest, of materialism in seventeenth century English philosophy. One might wonder about the narrow temporal scope. After all, Hobbes died (1679) not so long before Locke (1704). Furthermore, we already have excellent studies of seventeenth century materialism, such as Mintz's *Hunting of Leviathan* (1962), and more recent authoritative treatments, such as Jolley's *Locke's Touchy Subjects: Materialism and Immortality* (2015). However, Duncan's book is an important new contribution. It shares the incisiveness and erudition of these texts. But his discussion is more systematic than Mintz and more comprehensive than Jolley. No mean feat, but I will explain.

Duncan begins with Hobbes's efforts to establish materialism about everything, especially finite minds. Duncan provides a perceptive overview and analysis of the rich, though short, and highly antagonistic, exchange between Descartes and Hobbes in the *Third Objections and Replies* to Descartes' *Meditations*. Hobbes attempts to demonstrate that immaterialism is an incoherent foundation or subject for the mental actions of finite minds, nor even for their mere qualities. For similar reasons, Hobbes thinks we have no real idea of an infinite immaterial (hence unperceivable) substance, God. Duncan's treatment of this famous, difficult, encounter is even-handed and thorough. Although Duncan does not put it this way, the upshot seems to be that the brief dispute ends in a draw since they do 'not agree whether immaterial substance can be a genuine subject. On the theological question, Duncan observes that Hobbes seems to shift in the long run from a view that God is simply a know-not-what that produces the world and our sensations, to a far different view, that God is a 'pure and simple spirit corporeal', which pervades and energizes all things, reminiscent of the God of ancient and early Christian Stoics, like Tertullian, whom Hobbes admires and often invokes.

Duncan next turns to the negative attitude towards Hobbes among prominent 'Cambridge Platonists' (47) like Henry More and Ralph Cudworth. Both were at once optimistic about the new science and philosophy, and cautious about its potentially atheistic implications. They perceived in Hobbes a system that was at once atheistic and scientifically inadequate. Hobbes's imagistic theory of ideas which entails that we have no idea of God as infinite substance, is rejected by Cudworth because we can have an idea of God even if we cannot have an image of him. More, on the other hand, rejects the Cartesian conception of God as un-extended: God is an extended but immaterial



spirit fully interspersed with the world. Duncan proceeds, in Chapter 3, to consider More and Cudworth's similar suggestions on how to ground regularity within random processes. More attributes this regulating power to a 'spirit of nature' (47) mediating between God and world, while Cudworth invokes a 'plastic nature' (47). It is hard not to agree with Duncan's general verdict (73) that these ad hoc hypotheses, intended to account for motion and change better than strict mechanism, are scientifically unmotivated steps backward.

The middle chapter of the book takes up the 'anti-Hobbesian materialism' of Margaret Cavendish, who published several books criticizing experimental philosophy (à la Boyle) and defending a panpsychist version of materialism. Duncan explains, as clearly as one might hope, Cavendish's view that matter comes in three kinds: strictly inanimate (dead); sensitive; and rational. She argues ingeniously that such a tripartite conception of matter is necessary to explain many varieties of natural phenomenon, especially small and large animals, but also the powers of magnetism and fire. Duncan correctly, if sadly, observes that Cavendish in her own time was a 'Philosopher Without Influence' (89). The neglect of her work in her own day—which she well noticed, and protested—is not a reason to continue this neglect, and one might have liked more effort to connect her work, in this volume, to the received themes in Hobbes, Locke, More, etc.

The heart of the book, and its most important contributions, are contained in Chapters 5-8, and the Epilogue. Duncan really shines as a Locke expert, and in these chapters, he offers some very innovative conceptions of Locke's notoriously ambiguous attitude to materialism about finite minds, the sleeping soul, human identity, and God; as well as the 'existential' implications of these considerations for human responsibility and immortality. To begin, Duncan makes a very strong case, in these chapters, for a unification of concern or 'common thread' across Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, More, and Cudworth. The influence of both Descartes and Hobbes upon Locke is evident, even if he was suspicious both of the dualism (and innatism) of the former and the strict materialism (and corporeal theism) of the latter. In Chapter 5, for example, Duncan makes the interesting (but questionable) suggestion that Locke's long tirade against innate ideas in the First Book of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (ECHU) might be intended to open the door to materialism: 'If one thought that innate ideas required an immaterial mind, one might be attracted to dualism on that account. But if one was then persuaded by Locke, that there were no innate ideas, that reason for dualism would disappear, and materialism would seem a possibility again.' (103) This is an intriguing but very questionable connection. Yes, Hobbes is an imagist and empiricist about ideas; but is there a reason he could not admit innate ideas despite his

materialism? And is there an obvious reason a dualist like Descartes could not oppose innatism on epistemic grounds? After all, Locke himself, no innatist, declares it ‘more probable’ that human consciousness is annexed to ‘one individual immaterial substance.’ (ECHU 2.27.25)

An anti-Cartesian doctrine more directly related to materialism is the Lockean view that the soul or mind does not always think. Descartes claimed that since thought is the principal or defining attribute of the soul, it must always think, even in deep sleep and before birth in the womb. Locke takes the more common-sensical view that the soul always has the power of thought but does not always think, e.g., in deep sleep. Duncan argues that the Lockean position encourages materialism, or at least a less metaphysical sort of dualism: perhaps the brain itself is the seat of cognition, which sustains the soul even in lieu of active thought (107).

Chapter 6 takes up Locke’s often tortured speculations on our idea of substance or ‘substratum’, that which somehow supports the qualities of things with which we are more directly familiar: their extension, figure, weight, color, etc. As Duncan explains, Locke is confident that we naturally presume substance, especially for natural things; but we fail to arrive at a clear and adequate conception of this notion. Locke says in at the beginning of a detailed chapter, that ‘we accustom ourselves to suppose some substratum’ of the qualities we perceive in things (ECHU 2.23.1), but then quickly seems to disabuse us of this very idea: ‘we suppose them existing in and supported by some common subject; which support we denote by the name *Substance*, though it be certain we have no clear or distinct idea of that thing we suppose a support.’ (ECHU 2.23.4) Similarly, when he imagines himself pressed to explain clearly the ontology of ‘space void of body’ he replies *tu quoque*: ‘whether this space void of body be *substance* or *accident*, I shall readily answer, I know not: nor shall be ashamed to own my ignorance, till they that ask show me a clear, distinct idea of substance.’ (ECHU 2.13.17) Duncan helpfully sheds light on Locke’s perplexity about substance, by comparing his thoughts with Henry More’s similar musings in *Immortality of the Soul* (1959), which probably influenced Locke on this issue.

Chapter 7 is a thorough, impressive discussion of Locke’s proof of God’s existence. Earlier, Locke remarkably asserts that ‘Tis as certain that there is a God as that opposite angles made by the intersection of two straight are equal.’ (ECHU 1.4.16) He proposes to make good on this conviction in Book IV, Chapter 10 of the Essay: ‘Our Knowledge of the Existence of a God’. Locke’s proof, a cosmological argument, has been rightly criticized on many counts. Duncan wisely focuses on what the assumptions of the proof reveal about Locke’s attitude to materialism and the relation between matter and thought, including the much-discussed claim, early in Book

IV, ‘that God can, if he so pleases, superadd to matter a faculty of thinking.’ (ECHU 4.3.6) The main take-away of Duncan’s detailed, judicious, analysis—which strongly engages significant contributions to the recent secondary literature—is that it might be the case that that we are able to think because we have incorporeal minds, and it might be the case that we are able to think because God made matter in us thin.’ (159). The concluding Chapter 8 of the volume nicely ties together sundry issues about Locke’s ‘inclinations’ concerning animal minds, the continuity (or chain of being) in nature, and his ultimate agnosticism about materialism.

In conclusion: there is a welcome directness, and charity, even humility, throughout this concise volume. Duncan clearly knows his stuff; but there is no boasting or exaggerated theorizing. He hews closely to the texts and draws only modest conclusions, when no more is justified. Like Locke himself, Duncan appreciates the immense difficulty of the materialism question, and does not pronounce more than is warranted. This makes for an edifying and generous study, which might be returned to often by scholars and students of early modern European metaphysics.

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