

Watts and Trotter Cockburn on the Power of Thinking

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Penultimate version

Abstract

My chapter examines Isaac Watts's and Catharine Trotter Cockburn's views concerning the metaphysics of the mind and their underlying accounts of powers and substances. In *Philosophical Essays on Various Subjects*, Watts criticizes Locke's account of substances and argues for his own preferred account of substance. Watts argues that there is no need to postulate an unknown substratum, as Locke does. Instead, Watts searches for a better explanation of what substances are. He proposes that bodily substance just is solid extension and that mental substance is identical with the power of thinking. This means that Watts believes that some powers can be substances. I will show how Watts defends his account of substance against various objections. Cockburn was not satisfied by Watts's account of substance and disagrees with Watts's understanding of powers. She believes that Watts is too quick to draw metaphysical conclusions. Cockburn takes seriously the limitations of human understanding and emphasizes that humans are ignorant about many metaphysical truths. I end by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of Watts's and Cockburn's accounts of powers and substances.

Keywords: Isaac Watts, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, metaphysics of the mind, powers, substances, mind and body

1. Introduction

This chapter examines a philosophical debate between the British writer, theologian, and philosopher Isaac Watts (1674–1748) and the British philosopher and writer Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679?–1749) concerning the ontological status of the power of thinking.¹ Watts proposes in his *Philosophical Essays on Various Subjects* (1733)² that the power of thinking is a substance. His claim is not that all powers are substances, but rather he challenges the common assumption that all powers are modes or qualities. While he accepts that some powers are modes, he argues that the power of thinking is a substance. He develops this view in opposition to John Locke’s substratum account of substance and argues that there is no need to postulate an unknown substratum. Watts aims to show that the view that a mental substance just is a power of thinking can account for all the features that mental substances are meant to have. Cockburn responds critically to Watts’s account of substance in her *Remarks upon some Writers* (1743).³ She disagrees with Watts about the ontological status of the power of thinking and argues that powers require a substance that is distinct from them. Moreover, she challenges Watts’s arguments by drawing attention to the limitations of human understanding.

In the following I begin by outlining Locke’s account of substance in section 2, as this will provide helpful background for understanding Watts’s criticism of it. In section 3, I carefully analyze Watts’s arguments for his preferred account of substance and examine how he defends his view against several objections. In section 4, I turn to Cockburn’s critical response to Watts. I conclude by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of Watts’s and Cockburn’s positions.

2. Locke on Substances

¹ For further background on Watts, see Rivers (2004). For further background on Cockburn’s life and philosophical writings, see Boeker (2023).

² Hereafter references to Watts (1733), *Philosophical Essays upon Various Subjects* will be cited in the text as “PEVS”, followed by Essay, section, and page number.

³ Hereafter references to Cockburn (2006 [1743]), *Remarks upon some Writers*, edited by Patricia Sheridan, will be cited in the text as “RSW”, followed by page number.

Since Watts develops his account of substance in response to Locke's philosophy, it is helpful to begin by outlining Locke's account of substance. In Book II of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690)⁴ Locke examines how the human mind acquires simple and complex ideas. Complex ideas, according to Locke, include ideas of modes, ideas of substances, and ideas of relations.⁵ After the mind has been furnished with many simple ideas by means of sensation and reflection, Locke argues, the mind "takes notice also, that a certain number of these simple *Ideas* go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing" (*Essay* II.xxiii.1). If we constantly observe certain ideas together, Locke claims that we start to suppose that they all belong to an underlying entity:

Because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple *Ideas* can subsist by themselves, we accustom our selves, to suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *Substance*. (*Essay* II.xxiii.1)

Because we cannot imagine how they [i.e. sensible qualities] should subsist alone, nor one in another, 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. (*Essay* II.xxiii.4)

Here Locke introduces the so-called substratum. He argues that we suppose there to be an underlying entity or substratum because we cannot conceive or imagine how various sensible qualities subsist by themselves. The question of how Locke understands a substratum continues to be a matter of controversial debate among Locke scholars. Some interpreters have proposed that a Lockean substratum is a "bare particular," meaning that it is an entity that does not have any qualities.⁶ Others reject the bare particular reading and have argued instead for a "deflationary" interpretation, according to which substances are identical with substrata.⁷ Another interpretive proposal is that Locke identifies substrata with real essences.⁸ However, critics of the real essence interpretation have pointed out that his discussion of substrata and real essences are not directly linked in his texts and that they play different roles in Locke's philosophy. While substrata are meant to unify different qualities, real essences are inner constitutions of things and offer a causal

⁴ Hereafter references to Locke (1975 [1690]), *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. H. Nidditch, will be cited in the text as "*Essay*", followed by Book, chapter, section number.

⁵ See Locke, *Essay*, II.xii.1.

⁶ Proponents of this view include Bennett (1987; 2001, 2:108–23), Jolley (1999, 74–8).

⁷ Such an interpretation has been defended by Jacovides (2017, ch. 4), Korman (2010).

⁸ Proponents include Ayers (1975), Bolton (1976).

explanation for why things have certain observable qualities.⁹ Issues such as these motivate a further functionalist interpretation, according to which substrata are functional entities and are characterized by their roles.¹⁰ This functionalist reading takes seriously Locke’s claim “that of *Substance*, we have no *Idea* of what it is, but only a confused obscure one of what it does” (*Essay* II.xiii.19). The interpretive options sketched here are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather are meant to illustrate that controversial disputes concerning Locke’s account of substances and substrata continue to the present day.¹¹

Locke’s correspondence with Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, sheds further light on his understanding of substances, and thinking substances, in particular.¹² In Book II of the *Essay* Locke examines how the human mind acquires various ideas such as the idea of substance. This examination is guided by experience and observation. In his correspondence with Stillingfleet Locke supplements and clarifies the account of substance that he developed in the *Essay*, for instance, by further investigating what can and cannot be known about substances on the basis of reasoning. In the Stillingfleet correspondence, Locke uses the terms “soul” and “spirit” to refer to a thinking substance, irrespective of whether a thinking substance is material or immaterial.¹³ According to Locke, it can be demonstrated that thinking inheres in a substance, but we cannot know whether the thinking substance is material or immaterial.¹⁴ Locke writes to Stillingfleet:

First, we experiment in ourselves thinking. The idea of this action or mode of thinking is inconsistent with the idea of self-subsistence, and therefore has a necessary connexion with a support or subject of inhesion: the idea of that support is what we call substance; and so from thinking experimented in us, we have a proof of a thinking substance in us, which in my sense is a spirit. (*Works Locke*, 4:33)

In this passage Locke offers a demonstration for why experiences such as feeling cold, feeling hungry, or believing that Paris is the capital of France presuppose the existence of a thinking substance. According to Locke, it is inconsistent that experiences such as feeling cold subsist by

⁹ Locke introduces his account of real essences in *Essay* III.iii.15. For further discussion as to why it is problematic to identify Lockean substrata with real essences, see Bennett (1987), Kim (2022), Stuart (2013, 217).

¹⁰ This reading is defended by Kim (2019, ch. 6; 2022).

¹¹ For further helpful discussion of Locke’s account of substance, see Clay (2022), Duncan (2022, ch. 6), Mattern (1983), Millican (2015), Newman (2000).

¹² See Locke, *Works Locke*, 4:5–40. References to Locke (1823) are cited in the text as “*Works Locke*,” followed volume and page number.

¹³ See Locke, *Works Locke*, 4:33–7.

¹⁴ See Locke, *Works Locke*, 4:37.

themselves. In his view there cannot be an experience without there also being a thing or subject that has the experience, or in which the experience inheres. Hence, Locke claims that “we have a proof of a thinking substance in us” (*Works Locke*, 4:33). Yet this does not tell us anything about the exact metaphysical constitution of thinking substances and Locke remains epistemically humble about metaphysical questions that exceed the scope of human understanding such as questions concerning the metaphysical constitution of thinking substances.

3. Isaac Watts’s Account of Substances

3.1 Watts against the Substratum Account of Substance

Since Watts’s own account of substance is meant to overcome problems that he identifies with Locke’s substratum account of substance, I will begin by introducing Watts’s criticism of Locke’s view. Watts questions the belief of the existence of “a sort of unknown real Being call’d *Substance in general*, which supports all the Properties that we observe in particular different Beings” (PEVS, II.i, 48). Watts worries that the substratum account of substance does not make it possible to distinguish different types of substances such as bodily and mental substances. As a result there would be only one type of substance and different individuals could only be distinguished by their properties or accidents. Let us consider the relevant passage in full:

Truly if there were any such real Being in Nature as *Substance in general*, or a common Substance which supports all the Properties of things, and this Being were utterly unknown to us, then I think it might be granted, that all Beings are, or at least might be the same in Substance, and are or may be diversify’d only by their Properties or Accidents: for if we know nothing of this Being call’d *Substance*, we can deny nothing of it: And then perhaps it might be said, that God and the Creature, that Body and Mind, are the same in Substance, and that they differ only in certain Properties: But this is a most palpable Falsehood, which I shall take some further notice of by and by: for God and the Creature differ from each other in their very Essence, in their substantial Nature or *physical* Being, tho’ the *Logical* or generic Idea of *Substance* may be apply’d to them both, as self-subsisting Beings. So Matter and Mind, or Body and Spirit have a real, essential and unchangeable Difference in the very Substance of them, *i.e.* in what they are in *Nature*, tho’ the *Name Substance* be attributed

to both, because they both agree so far, that *they both subsist by themselves.*” (PEVS, II.i, 49–50)

Watts’s argument against the real existence of substance in general can be analyzed as follows:

- (1) Assume substances in general exist that support all the properties of things and such substances in general are utterly unknown to us.
- (2) If (1) is correct, then all substances that exist belong to the same type of substance and can only be individuated by means of their properties.
- (3) Hence, it follows from (1) and (2) that God, body, and mind are the same type of substance and differ only with regard to their properties.
- (4) Statement (3) is false.
- (5) God, body and mind “have a real, essential and unchangeable Difference in the very Substance of them”.

When Watts speaks of “substances in general” he seems to attribute to Locke the view that there is a general entity that provides support for properties and that every particular substance contains this general entity. Watts’s appeal to substances in general may be said to anticipate “bare particular” interpretations of Locke’s substratum account. This is further supported by Watts’s claim that substances can only be individuated by their properties. Watts’s argument reveals that it is important for him that mind and body are essentially different substances. He believes that Locke’s substratum account—and particularly Locke’s view that we cannot know the metaphysical constitution of substance—has the “*dangerous*” consequence that it allows for the possibility of thinking matter.¹⁵ Watts worries that if the thinking matter hypothesis is true, “then our own Souls may be material Beings for ought we know, and consequently divisible and mortal” (PEVS, II.iii, 62).

Watts is not only concerned that human minds may be material entities but also that God may be material, which in his view could lead to Spinozism:

And yet further I add, If this Opinion should be true, then how can we tell but *God* himself, even the Infinite Mind, may have also the Property of *Solid Extension*, that is, may also be Matter or Body; and then he may be the same with the Universe of Beings, as *Spinoza* fancied; and thus the whole Universe, God and this World, may be the same individual

¹⁵ See Watts, PEVS, II.iii, 61–3. Locke argues for the thinking matter hypothesis in *Essay* IV.iii.6.

Substance, which *Spinoza* maintains with Subtilty; for if there be such a Thing as an universal ulterior *Substratum* necessary to support *Solid Extension*, and to support the *Power of Thinking*, and this Substance or *Substratum* be unknown a thing as Mr. *Locke* supposes, how can I deny any thing concerning it? Or at least how can I be sure that God and the material World have not one common Substance? (PEVS, II.iii, 63)

Overall, Watts finds it unsatisfactory to postulate a substratum or an unknown something. His criticism targets a particular understanding of what a substratum is and assumes that all substances, including minds, bodies, and God, share the same type of substratum. His assumption that a Lockean substratum is a general metaphysical entity shared by all substances can be questioned and we will see in section 4 how Cockburn challenges this assumption. Before we turn to her critical response to Watts, it is worth turning to his own proposal of what substances are.

3.2 Watts's Alternative Account of Substance

To overcome the problems that Watts has identified for Locke's substratum account, Watts offers an alternative hypothesis of what mental and bodily substances are. He identifies two general conditions that every account of substance is meant to satisfy. Furthermore, he proposes a hypothesis of what mental and bodily substances are and shows that his proposed account of mental and bodily substances satisfies the general conditions. Let us examine each of these in turn.

According to Watts, every substance is meant to have the following features: First, it supports qualities or properties, which could not exist without such a support. Second, it can exist independently or by itself.¹⁶

As we have seen above, Watts criticizes Locke for failing to account for the essential difference between mind and body. This leads Watts to claim that "*Body* and *Spirit* are the two most general and distinct, if not the only Ideas we have of *Substances*?" (PEVS, II.ii, 51). On this basis he formulates the following hypothesis about mental and bodily substances:

Now let us for the present suppose *Body* to be solid Extension, and *Spirit* to be a Power of Cogitation or Thinking, or at least that these are the prime distinguishing Properties of

¹⁶ See Watts, PEVS, II.i, 48. In the text he draws on scholastic accounts of substance and first presents it in Latin, namely "*Substantia est Ens per se subsistens et substans accidentibus*" (PEVS, II.i, 48), before giving the English translation.

these two Beings, and we will enquire whether there be need of any further Idea of some Substance to support them. (PEVS, II.ii, 51–52)

He hypothesizes that bodily substance just is solid extension and mental substance just is the power of thinking.

To provide evidence for his hypothesis, Watts intends to show that his proposed account of substance satisfies the two general constraints that substances are meant to have. First, let us consider how Watts shows that solid extension provides sufficient support for all bodily properties or qualities and that the power of thinking provides sufficient support for all other mental properties or qualities. To establish these claims Watts considers all qualities or modes of which we can have ideas and claims that they “are all either *Sensible, Intellectual or Abstracted*” (PEVS, II.ii, 52). Sensible or corporeal qualities such as “Figure, Size, Colour, Motion, Rest, Resistance, Situation, &c. ... all plainly subsist in *solid Extension* as in their Subject” (PEVS, II.ii, 52). It seems plausible that all these qualities require solid extension in order to subsist, but Watts goes a step further and also claims that “they want nothing else” (PEVS, II.ii, 52).

Turning to intellectual qualities, Watts argues that “*Spirit, or a Power of Thinking, is a sufficient Subject or Support for any intellectual Qualities, whether it be Consciousness, Knowing, Reasoning, Doubting, Fearing, Hoping, Wishing, Willing, Resolving, Chusing, Refusing, &c.*” (PEVS, II.ii, 52). According to Watts, all of these qualities “subsist plainly in a *Cogitative Nature or Power* as in their Subject” (PEVS, II.ii, 52), but he adds a further supposition, which is not universally accepted, namely that “this *Power* to be always in Act” (PEVS, II.ii, 52). As we will see in section 4, Cockburn challenges this supposition.

Next Watts considers abstracted ideas or modes such “as Cause, Effect, Likeness, Difference, &c.” (PEVS, II.ii, 52) and argues that “they belong sometimes to Bodies, sometimes to Spirits, but they need nothing to support them as their Subject, besides a *Thinking Power* or *Solid Extension*” (PEVS, II.ii, 52).

On this basis, Watts believes to have shown that solid extension or the power of thinking provides sufficient support for all qualities or modes and, hence, that his account of substance satisfies the first constraint that an account of substance is meant to have.

Watts does not elaborate on how exactly he understands subsistence in solid extension or subsistence in a cogitative nature. There are at least two different ways of spelling out what it means for bodily qualities to subsist in solid extension or for mental qualities to subsist in a cogitative nature: First, bodily qualities may be superadded to solid extension or mental qualities may be superadded to a cogitative nature and then somehow exist or inhere in it. Second, bodily

qualities may be specifications of solid extension or mental qualities specifications of cogitative nature rather than items that have been superadded to them.¹⁷ Watts does not explicitly engage with either option. However, as I will explain in a moment, several of his other metaphysical commitments make it unlikely that he would accept the first reading. We have textual evidence that Watts rejects Locke's thinking matter hypothesis, namely the possibility that thought is superadded to a material entity.¹⁸ Moreover, Watts is critical of the existence of a "*pure Substance, existing abstracted from all Qualities*" (PEVS, II.ii, 51). If Watts accepted the former reading, according to which bodily or mental qualities are superadded to solid extension or cogitative nature respectively, then he would have to accept the possibility that there are pure bodily substances that lack specific bodily qualities or pure mental substances that lack particular thoughts. It is unlikely that Watts would be willing to accept this consequence because such a view comes close to the account of a pure substance in general that he ascribes to Locke and that he criticizes. Moreover, Watts does not only believe that a mental substance is a power of thinking but also he argues that this power is always active.¹⁹ In this vein, he writes that "[i]n this Case I may so far agree with the Schoolmen as not to make very much Distinction between a *Power of Cogitation or Thinking*, and that *Actual Cogitation or Thought*" (PEVS, II.iii, 55). This suggests that Watts would be critical of the possibility of a pure mental substance without any actual thoughts. These considerations intimate that Watts would have reservations about the former interpretation and offer indirect support in favour of the latter interpretation.

Watts also considers the second constraint that every account of substance must satisfy and argues as follows that solid extension and the power of thinking "subsist of themselves independent of any Created Being" (PEVS, II.ii, 53):

No Creature can give Being to one Particle of *solid Extension*, or the meanest *Thinking Power*, or can annihilate and destroy either of them and put them out of Being: Not the feeblest *Spirit*, or the least Particle of *Matter* or *Body* can be utterly destroy'd and annihilated by the most powerful Creature. (PEVS, II.ii, 53)

Watts continues by adding further considerations in support of his proposed account of substance. A Lockean substratum is meant to unite different qualities or properties into one substance. Watts believes that his account also has the resources to account for the unity of properties:

¹⁷ I thank Dominik Perler for drawing my attention to these different readings and for prompting me to think more about the different interpretive options.

¹⁸ See Watts, PEVS, II.iii, 61–3.

¹⁹ See Watts, PEVS, II.ii, 52, II.iii, 55–56.

why may not a *Power of Thinking* be this supposed unknown Cause and Subject of the Combination of the several Properties of Spirits? And why may not *solid Extension* be the Cause of the Union of the several Properties and Qualities of Body? What is there necessary to unite all the Properties of Matter beyond *solid Extension*? Make a Trial by taking a Survey of the Properties of a Spirit? Will not the Idea of a *Thinking Power* unite them all? (PEVS, II.ii, 53)

Watts does not spell out how exactly solid extension or a power of thinking unites different properties. However, his account is not more obscure than Locke's proposal that there is some unknown underlying substratum that unites different qualities.

According to Watts, another advantage of his proposed view is its ontological parsimony.²⁰ If we accept his view that solid extension and a power of thinking are substances we avoid multiplying entities without necessity. If Watts is correct that substrata are unnecessary and other entities have all the features that are commonly ascribed to substances, then there is no need to postulate substrata. This gives a reason to prefer Watts's ontologically more parsimonious view.

3.3 Objections and Responses

Watts anticipates potential critics who might reject his proposed view that the power of thinking is a substance and considers several objections and responses. Watts examines the possibility that the power of thinking and/or solid extension are not substances and examines what other ontological status they might have. First, he discusses whether it might be possible that the power of thinking or solid extension are modes. If we accept that solid extension or the power of thinking are merely modes or qualities, but not substances, then it seems possible that a substance remains, even if the modes are destroyed.²¹ Watts responds to this objection as follows:

But destroy *solid Extension*, and in the room of it there will remain a meer Nothing. Destroy *Thinking Power*, and there remains Nothing in its room. We have no Idea left. All Ideas are utterly banished out of the Mind, and all Beings are banished out of the World at once by

²⁰ See Watts, PEVS, II.iii, 54.

²¹ See Watts, PEVS, II.iii, 56.

this Supposition. Therefore it seems to me that *solid Extension* and a *Cogitative Power* are real Substances, for if you nullify them they leave meer Nothing behind. (PEVS, II.iii, 56)

Watts is aware that his critics may raise a further objection and propose that it is important to distinguish essential modes or properties from accidental modes or properties. Given this distinction, a critic can still object that solid extension and the power of thinking may be essential modes of substances that cannot be destroyed without also destroying the substance.²² Watts is not satisfied by this objection either and replies “that what is *only* and *meerly* a Mode or Property (even tho’ it be an essential Mode) of any particular Being, whether Body or Spirit, may be destroy’d, and yet some Substance, some real Being will remain” (PEVS, II.iii, 57). He acknowledges further that if an essential mode is destroyed, the being “will not have the same Form or Name as it had before” (PEVS, II.iii, 57) and illustrates this point with examples: if one destroys the roundness of a certain body that used to be a bowl, the “Body ceases to be a *Bowl*, but ’tis Body or Matter still” (PEVS, II.iii, 57). Likewise, he argues that if “the peculiar essential Mode (whatever it be) that distinguishes *Human Spirit* from all other Spirits” is destroyed, it will still be a spirit, “tho’ it ceases to be a human Spirit” (PEVS, II.iii, 57). Watts’s point is that these cases are different from “*solid Extension* and a *thinking Power*; for if you destroy these there is nothing at all remains, not so much as an Idea” (PEVS, II.iii, 57). This leads Watts to conclude that solid extension and a power of thinking “are not so properly meer essential Modes, but they are Substances themselves.” (PEVS, II.iii, 57).

Let us turn to a different objection that arises from the view that powers must inhere in substances. Locke endorses this view in *Essay* II.xxi. This is a problem that is pressing for Watts’s account of mental substance. One may grant Watts’s view that bodily substance just is solid extension, but object that thinking power cannot be a substance, because “a Power must have some Substance to inhere in” (PEVS, II.iii, 57–58). Watts anticipates that one way how a critic could spell out the objection is to argue that “Extension and Expansion belongs to all Substances whatsoever; and it is probable that Extension void of Solidity is the *Substratum* of the thinking Powers of a Spirit” (PEVS, II.iii, 58). In response to this objection, Watts maintains that scholars who have been accustomed through the study of “Logick to conceive *Power* as a Mode or Property” (PEVS, II.iii, 58) cannot easily “drop this Prejudice. Yet in common Language among *Heathens* or *Christians*, the *heavenly Powers*, or the *Powers above*, signify God, or Gods, or Angels, and the Scripture uses this Language, for it often calls Angels *Principalities* and *Powers*” (PEVS, II.iii, 58). Thereby Watts draws attention to other examples of powers such as God that are also substances and do

²² See Watts, PEVS, II.iii, 56–7.

not require another substance in which they inhere. Watts believes that this view is also supported by the way how ordinary people think about the soul:

A poor young Creature in the lowest Rank of Life being once asked, What she supposed her Soul to be, after a little musing reply'd, *My Soul is my Think*; whereby it is plain she meant her *Power of Thinking*. And I believe the greatest Part of Mankind, if they were asked the same Question, would sooner and more readily reply, that it is something in them that enables them to think, speak, move, and gives them the Power of Thought and Action, than they would say, 'Twas any thing, long, broad, or deep. (PEVS, II.iii, 59)

Even if one grants Watts's view that the power of thinking is a substance, one may worry that this view faces another problem, namely to explain how one power can have several other powers.²³ More precisely, one may object to Watts's proposal "That a Spirit itself has several Powers, (*viz.*) Judging, Reasoning, Wishing, Willing, Fearing, &c. Now how can one Power have other Powers?" (PEVS, II.iii, 59).

Watts does not share this assumption and draws attention to counterexamples to show that one power can have other powers:

I answer, Voice is a Power in Man, and yet a human Voice has the Power of Singing or Musick: Again, Singing has a Power of gladdening the Heart. Why then may not a Spirit which is a substantial Power have several other modal Powers or Properties in it? (PEVS, II.iii, 59)

It may be worth distinguishing two issues here. First, there is the question of whether one substance or one substantial power can have different modal powers.²⁴ Second, there is the question of whether one modal power can have other modal powers. Watts clearly endorses the former and the examples he offers suggest that he also accepts the latter. The latter question is complex and it is not immediately clear whether the power of singing—to use Watts's example—is best understood as a power of a human voice, which would support the view that a modal power can have another modal power, or whether the power of singing is a power of a human being, which would support the view that powers belong to substances or to substantial powers.

²³ Locke argues that only substances can have powers and that powers cannot have other powers. For instance, see Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.19.

²⁴ When I speak of "modal powers" I refer to entities that are both modes and powers. This makes it possible to distinguish substances that are powers from modes that are powers.

Watts believes that logic, grammar, and language can mislead us into thinking that powers are distinct from substances.²⁵ In his view ordinary people often have a better grasp of reality than learned scholars. After careful consideration of various objections and responses Watts concludes that substrata are mere fictions of the imagination and writes:

Thus by *Grammatical* Names and Terminations, and by *Logical* Methods of ranging them, we are led insensibly to suppose *solid Extension*, and a *Power of Cogitation* to be meer Qualities, and that there is or must be some unknown sort of Thing called *Substance* to uphold them: And thus perhaps Men frame to themselves new and imaginary Beings, which have no Existence in Nature; and at the same time confess they are unknown and unknowable, and that they have no Idea of them, and know not what they are; and I think I have shewn that *Nature* has no need of them, and therefore *Fancy* need not give them an Existence. (PEVS, II.iv, 70–1)

Overall, Watts sees no need to postulate unknown substrata. Indeed, he regards his alternative account as preferable not only because it can explain all the features that substances are meant to have but also because of its ontological parsimony.

4. Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Critical Response to Watts

Cockburn prefixes her *Remarks upon some Writers* with “Some Cursory Thoughts” (RSW, 91–105) on various metaphysical topics, which include a critical discussion of Watts’s account of substance and his claim that “*a power of thinking is the substance of spirit*; that this is sufficient to support all the properties of spirit, and that therefore there is no need of supposing any other *unknown* subject of them” (RSW, 100). Cockburn points out that “thinking is the *action* of spirits” and that this point “is acknowledged ... even by those, who contend, that it is their very substance” (RSW, 100). This prompts her to ask a good question: “how is it possible to conceive, that the actions of a being are the being itself?” (RSW, 100).²⁶ As we will see further below, in her view Watts is too quick to

²⁵ For instance, see Watts, PEVS, II.iii, 58, II.iv, 65–6, 70–1.

²⁶ One may accept Cockburn’s point that an action needs to be distinguished from the agent or the being that is capable of acting and propose that particular actions can be distinguished from the agent if the agent is simply the power of thinking. Since the power of thinking is different from particular thoughts, one can argue that it does not follow, as Cockburn suggests, that particular actions and the agent are the same. It is not clear that this rebuttal is available to Watts, because he believes that the power of thinking is always active. See Watts, PEVS, II.iii, 55–56.

draw metaphysical conclusions. She takes seriously the limitations of human understanding and emphasizes that humans are ignorant about many metaphysical truths. Let us now take a closer look at her critical response to Watts.

Cockburn is critical of Watts's interpretation of Lockean substances. In particular, she questions whether Locke would accept Watts's interpretation that Lockean substances in general have real being. According to Cockburn, Watts assumes that Locke's claims about "*our idea of substance*" are meant to be claims concerning "*the real nature of substance*" (RSW, 102). In her view it is important to distinguish our idea of substance from the real nature of substance. She describes "*our general idea of substance*" as "*indeed the same everywhere; an abstract idea, in which all substances must agree, though in other respects they may be essentially different*" (RSW 102–3). By contrast, Cockburn, following Locke, maintains that every really existing substance "is particular" (RSW, 103). She further notes that Locke "often speaks of [individuals of all kinds], as particular *distinct substances*" (RSW, 103). Watts does not acknowledge the distinction between our general idea of substance and particular really existing substances. Cockburn would challenge the first premise of Watts's argument against the real existence in general and reject his assumption that substances in general exist.²⁷ According to Cockburn, we can have a general idea of substance, but it does not follow from this that substances in general really exist. Given Cockburn's reservations about the first premise of Watts's argument, she would regard the inferences that he draws from the second and third premises in the intermediate conclusion (3) as logically valid but not sounds. This means that the inference that the Lockean substratum account entails that only one type of substance exists lacks support. Consequently, Cockburn believes that Watts is too quick to infer from Locke's view that our general idea of substance is the same for various kinds of beings, that particular really existing substances cannot differ with respect to their essence. Hence, Watts's reasoning for an alternative account of substance is undermined.

Moreover, Cockburn challenges Watts's arguments that the power of thinking cannot be a mode.²⁸ If the power of thinking were merely a mode, then the mode might be destroyed and the substance of which it was a mode would remain. As mentioned above, Watts rejects this by arguing that if the power of thinking was destroyed, nothing would remain.²⁹ Cockburn is willing to grant that "[w]e have *no idea* left indeed of what remains, unless the obscure one of something, to which that power did belong" (RSW, 100). However, she points out that from the fact that we lack an idea of the entity that may remain it does not follow that there is no such entity:

²⁷ See section 3.1. above.

²⁸ See Cockburn, RSW 100–1.

²⁹ See Watts, PEVS, II.iii, 56.

But does it follow, that therefore nothing can remain? If there is ground, from reason and the nature of things, to conclude, that a power of thinking cannot subsist of itself, but must be the property of some being; our ignorance, or having *no idea* of what the substance of that being is, will not hinder it from remaining, if God should think fit to take from it the power of thinking. (RSW, 100)

Cockburn takes human ignorance seriously and believes that it is possible that entities exist even if we do not have ideas of them.

Cockburn offers additional considerations for why powers require a subject or substance distinct from the power itself. As we will see, these considerations lead her to believe that powers cannot be substances. She writes:

Logical ways of speaking, to which this ingenious author imputes our prejudices against allowing a power of thinking to subsist without a subject, seem, in this case, forms of speaking founded on reason and truth; for what idea can we frame of a *power*, without supposing some being, to which it belongs? What is a *power of thinking in perpetual act*, but an ability or capacity perpetually exerted? And how can this be conceived, but as the property and action of some being, that exerts its ability, and therefore must be distinct from it. (RSW, 100–101)

This passage makes clear that Cockburn and Watts have different conceptions of what the power of thinking is. Watts believes that the power of thinking is “always in Act” (PEVS, II.ii, 52) and thus he accepts that the mind perpetually thinks or—as one might also say—the power is perpetually exercised. By contrast, Cockburn regards powers as abilities. We find further evidence for Cockburn’s view that powers are abilities in the following passage:

But I cannot so well reconcile my reason to the notion, that a *power of thinking* may be the substance of spirit: actions and abilities (and I have no other idea of powers) seem unavoidably to imply some subject of them, some being, that exerts its powers in different ways of acting. (RSW, 101)

Cockburn's and Watts's disagreement about the ontological status of powers is related to another point of disagreement. Watts believes that the mind or soul is always thinking,³⁰ while Cockburn questions this view in her *Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay*.³¹ Cockburn argues that we do not know enough about the mental operations, for instance, during periods of sleep. She believes that there can be periods when the mind is not actively thinking. This suggests that it is possible that the power of thinking is not always exercised even if the mind retains the power of thinking. Cockburn's view stands in stark contrast to Watts's position. If one accepts Watts's view that the power of thinking is identical with the mental substance and that there is no difference between the power of thinking and the action of thinking, then it will be relevant to also accept that the mind perpetually thinks, because otherwise—if the mind or soul did not always think—it could be a very gappy entity. How plausible is it to assume that the soul always thinks? Philosophers like Cockburn or Locke, who question that the mind or soul always thinks, turn to instances of dreamless sleep—or at least what appears as dreamless sleep—to motivate the view that it is plausible that the mind does not think perpetually, especially during sleep.³²

Watts, by contrast, offers detailed arguments to explain why the mind always thinks even if it may not appear to us that way and we do not remember all the thoughts that the mind has, for instance, during sleep. During dreams, Watts argues, different types of impressions are made upon the brain, “which correspond to our Sensations and Ideas, and which are usually the Occasion of them” (PEVS, V.ii, 119). He argues that “some Impressions . . . are so soft and gentle, that there are no Traces, no Footstep of any such Motions left upon the Brain” (PEVS, V.ii, 120). In such cases, “the Soul might just be slightly conscious of them at that moment, and form correspondent Ideas, tho' both the Traces and Ideas vanish almost as fast as they are formed” (PEVS, V.ii, 120). Watts believes that such mental occurrences can be said to be dreams, but they are immediately forgotten afterwards. He distinguishes these soft and gentle impressions from another type of impressions “which do more strongly than the former, affect the Brain and occasion Ideas in the Soul, and yet do not with an over-vigorous Tide of Impressions deluge and

³⁰ See Watts, PEVS, V, 114–31. For further discussion of Watts's arguments for why the soul always thinks, see Boeker (2021, 219–20).

³¹ See Cockburn, *Defence*, 53–60. References to Cockburn (2006 [1702]) are cited in the text as “*Defence*”, followed by page number. For further discussion of Cockburn's reasons for rejecting the view that the soul always thinks, see Boeker (2021, 213–5, 221–4; 2023, 18–21).

³² Locke's arguments against the view that the soul always thinks can be found in *Essay* II.i.9–19. See also Boeker (2021, 160–2, 211–24). Locke's arguments target Descartes and other philosophers who believe that the soul always thinks. Descartes endorses this claim, for instance, in a letter to Hyperaspistes (August 1641), AT III:423–4; CSMK III:189–90. References to Descartes's writings are to René Descartes (1964–76), *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, cited in the text as “AT”, followed by volume and page number; and to René Descartes (1984–91), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, edited and translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (vol. 3), cited in the text as “CSM” (for vols. 1 and 2) and “CSMK” (for vol. 3), followed by volume and page number.

confound one another; this is usually called *Dreaming Sleep*” (PEVS, V.ii, 120). He adds that such dreams are commonly remembered because the impressions are strong enough and the mind is distinctly conscious of them. Watts believes that there is a third type of impressions, which occur as a multitude of many strong and violent impressions and these do not leave distinct traces or memories.³³

Cockburn does not directly engage with Watts’s arguments for why the soul always thinks, but, as already mentioned, she challenges the view that the soul thinks perpetually in her *Defence*. As part of her response to this philosophical debate she draws attention to how limited our understanding of mental operations is:

Do you understand *how* your soul thinks at all? *How* it passes from one thought to another? *How* it preserves its treasure of ideas, to produce them at pleasure on occasions? And recollects those it had not in a long time reflected on? *How* it moves your body, or is affected by it? These are operations, which I suppose you are not so sceptical as to doubt of; nor yet pretend to understand how they are done (*Defence*, 57)

More generally, Cockburn’s strategy is to emphasize the limitations of human understanding. For instance, as part of her discussion of Watts’s account of substances, she writes:

It has long been my opinion, that, from our ignorance of the nature of things, or of their manner of acting, how they cease to act, or how they resume their actions, no other reasonable conclusion can be drawn, but of the narrowness of our understandings. This is a lesson I learnt from Mr. *Locke’s Essay* (RSW, 101)

Cockburn takes the limitations of human understanding seriously when she engages with Watts’s proposed account of substance. According to her, the fact that we do not know what substance could exist in addition to the power of thinking or in addition to solid extension is no sufficient reason for inferring that mental substances are identical with the power of thinking and bodily substances are identical with solid extension. She asks: “Is there not at least the same ground for the very contrary conclusion?” (RSW, 101).

³³ See Watts, PEVS, V.ii, 120–1.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen above, Watts sees no need for postulating unknown substrata. In his view, they are useless and solid extension and the power of thinking are sufficient to explain all the features that bodily and thinking substances are meant to have. Cockburn challenges Watts's view and argues that due to our limited human understanding we are not entitled to infer that the power of thinking is a substance. For Cockburn, there are similar reasons to infer the contrary conclusion, namely that a mental substance is not identical with the power of thinking and that the substance may continue to exist even if the power of thinking has ceased. It may be worth noting that Cockburn does not discuss Watts's views concerning ontological parsimony and Watts may argue in response to Cockburn that ontological parsimony provides a reason to prefer his view.

The above discussion has also brought to light several points of disagreement between Watts and Cockburn. They disagree about the metaphysics of powers and specifically about the ontological status of the power of thinking. In Cockburn's view powers are abilities and it is possible that they are not always be exercised. If a power is exercised it becomes an action. Watts does not share Cockburn's view that powers are abilities, at least not in his discussion of the power of thinking. According to Watts, the power of thinking is always exercised. This is a crucial assumption that enables Watts to identify mental substances with the power of thinking. However, the cost of his view is that he cannot offer a meaningful distinction between powers, on the one hand, and actions, or the exercise of powers, on the other hand.

The controversy between Watts and Cockburn reveals further that their dispute rests on different assumptions as to what substances are. One option is to regard a substance as a substratum or as an underlying entity in which qualities or modes inhere. Cockburn adopts this understanding of substance. Another option is to understand a substance in terms of its essence.³⁴ As the scholarly literature on Locke's substratum account reveals, there are a number of different interpretations of what a substratum is. One interpretive option is to regard a substratum as a bare particular. Watts arguments against the Lockean substratum view target a substratum account like the bare particular interpretation. Another interpretive option is to identify substrata with real essences. This option comes closer to Watts's own view.³⁵ This is intimated, for example, by the emphasis that he puts on the essential difference between mind and body, which leads him to

³⁴ Such a view can be found in Descartes's *Principles*. In *Principles* I.53 Descartes claims that "each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence" (AT VIII A:25; CSM I:210). For further discussion of Descartes's metaphysics, see Garber (2013).

³⁵ It may be worth noting that Watts does not adopt the Lockean distinction between nominal and real essences.

argue that mind and body are distinct types of substances. It is worth noting that Watts accepts that substances provide support for properties or qualities, which suggests that he does not reject substrata per se but merely the postulation of featureless unnecessary entities. His main point is that it is unnecessary to postulate additional entities over and above the power of thinking or solid extension.

To sum up, Watts presents an intriguing metaphysical position when he proposes that the power of thinking is a substance. By contrasting Watts's view with Cockburn's critical response, I hope to have shown that their dispute sheds insightful light on eighteenth-century debates concerning the metaphysics of powers and substances.³⁶

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³⁶ I would like to thank Sebastian Bender and Dominik Perler for inviting me to contribute to this volume and for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. I presented earlier versions of this paper at the Powers and Abilities in Early Modern Philosophy Conference at the Humboldt University in Berlin in March 2023, at the Non-Cartesian Philosophies of Mind Workshop at the University of Oulu in May 2023, and at the University of Bergen in August 2023. I would like to thank all my audiences for helpful comments and suggestions.

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