

***Materialism from Hobbes to Locke*, by Stewart Duncan, New York, Oxford
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Stewart Duncan’s excellent book *Materialism from Hobbes to Locke* offers an insightful study of the debates concerning materialism during the seventeenth century. When we hear the expression ‘materialism’, we often associate with it the question of whether the human mind is an entirely material entity. Although the question of whether the human mind is material plays an important role throughout the seventeenth-century debates examined in this book, Duncan offers a broader understanding of materialism that is not restricted to the human mind. According to Duncan, materialism is ‘a view about some object or a group of objects. Often that object is the human mind’ (2), but materialism can also concern other objects such as animal minds or God. This leads Duncan to introduce materialism as ‘the view that the thing in question is wholly material, and has no immaterial part’ (2). He deliberately leaves open what it means to be material, because different philosophers featured in his book disagree about this question.

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on Thomas Hobbes. The first chapter analyses how Hobbes’s critique of Descartes’s philosophy sheds light on Hobbes’s materialism. Duncan carefully analyses how Hobbes rejects Descartes’s arguments for the existence of God by denying that we have an *idea* of God. Although Hobbes denies that we have an idea of God, he does not go so far to deny God’s existence. Additionally, Duncan shows how Hobbes distances his account of the human mind from Descartes’s view by offering a more materialistic view, which draws on his view that ideas are images. Furthermore, Duncan considers Hobbes’s view that we have no idea of substance and examines whether and how Descartes and Hobbes really differ on this issue.

Chapter 2 offers a helpful and detailed discussion of Hobbes's materialism. Duncan analyses three arguments for materialism that we can find in Hobbes's writings and shows how these arguments appeal to his nominalism and his account of language. Furthermore, the chapter examines Hobbes's views about God and how Hobbes develops a materialist view about God in his later writings.

Chapter 3 turns to two Cambridge Platonist philosophers, namely Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, and examines how they each criticize Hobbes's philosophy. Duncan pays particular attention to More's criticism of Hobbes's arguments for materialism and shows how More's account of the human mind differs not only from Hobbes's but also from Descartes's. Cudworth regards Hobbes as an atheist. Duncan not only offers a helpful analysis of Cudworth's critical response to Hobbes's alleged atheism, but also identifies questionable assumptions in Cudworth's objections. Both More and Cudworth regard Hobbes's materialist ontology as inadequate. They 'argue, in similar ways, that a view such as Hobbes's lacks adequate resources to explain the observed workings of the world' (65). Contrary to Hobbes, they believe that the workings of the material world are controlled by immaterial beings, which More calls 'the spirit of nature' and Cudworth calls 'plastic natures'.

In chapter 4 Duncan examines Margaret Cavendish's materialist philosophy, which differs in multiple ways from Hobbes's materialism. Cavendish offers an intriguing panpsychist account of the natural world, according to which some matter is irreducibly sensitive and other matter irreducibly rational. Duncan proposes that her view can be placed between Hobbes's and More's. Duncan not only shows how she rejects a mechanistic view of the natural world, but also how she reverses the order of explanation. To illustrate this point, Duncan draws attention to Cavendish's criticism of Hobbes's account of perception. While 'Hobbes thinks that pressure and reaction explained perception and thought, ... Cavendish thinks that perception and thought explain pressure and reaction' (82). More generally, Duncan notes that for Cavendish, in contrast to the mechanists, 'the thinking human being provides the basic causal model' (82). Although 'Cavendish denies the existence of incorporeal substances in nature' (84), she acknowledges the existence of supernatural incorporeal substances. In this regard, Duncan remarks, her philosophy differs from Hobbes's.

The second half of the book examines Locke's philosophy. In chapter 5 Duncan shows how Locke distances his view from Descartes's view that there are innate ideas and from Descartes's view that the mind always thinks. I will comment further on the latter issue below.

Chapter 6 focuses on Locke's discussion of our idea of substance in *Essay* II.xxiii. Duncan draws attention to striking parallels between this chapter and More's discussions in *The*

Immortality of the Soul.¹ Not only are there structural parallels, but Duncan also draws attention to how similar More's and Locke's thinking is about core issues concerning our idea of substance. Locke's discussion of our idea of substance in *Essay* II.xxiii is complex and intricate and Duncan's proposal to understand it against the background of More's philosophy advances current scholarship on these issues.

In chapter 7 Duncan turns to *Essay* IV.x and discusses Locke's arguments for why God cannot be material. Even though the view that Locke develops in *Essay* IV.x might be targeting Hobbes or Spinoza, Duncan proposes that Locke's discussion draws on Cudworth's *True Intellectual System*. According to Duncan, the principle 'that a being with less perfect features cannot cause more perfect features' (143) plays a crucial role in Locke's arguments for why God cannot be material. Cudworth, so Duncan argues, also relies on this principle.

In chapter 8 Duncan examines whether Locke, who officially was agnostic about the metaphysical constitution of the human mind, was inclined towards dualism or materialism. This question arises, because Locke's agnosticism about the human mind leaves scope for examining the probability of dualism and materialism. While there are passages in Locke's writings that suggest that Locke believes that it is more likely that human minds are immaterial, some scholars have argued that Locke regards materialism as more likely. For instance, Lisa Downing has suggested that Locke favours materialism due to the similarities between human and animal minds.² Duncan offers good arguments against Downing's interpretation, while also acknowledging that Locke regards materialism about the human mind as a genuine possibility.

Duncan ends the book by briefly considering works by John Toland and Anthony Collins, who have both been regarded as Lockean materialists. Duncan argues that Toland can be seen as a materialist, but that his materialism is not distinctively Lockean. By contrast, Collins was more Lockean. Collins, like Locke, defended the possibility of thinking matter, but Collins, so Duncan argues, was not committed to materialism.

Having outlined the core themes of the book, I now want to take a closer look at Duncan's analysis of Locke's criticism of Descartes's view that the soul always thinks.³ Duncan regards this discussion as illuminating, because it 'illustrates not only different views about the nature of the mind, but also differing views about how to investigate the question. Descartes claims to know the essence of the mind through clear and distinct perception, but Locke approaches the issue empirically' (104).

¹ See More, *The Immortality of the Soul*, Book 1, chapters 2–4.

² See Downing, 'Locke's Choice between Materialism and Dualism'.

³ See Duncan, *Materialism from Hobbes to Locke*, 103–7.

Duncan and I are in agreement that it is plausible to assume that Descartes endorses the view that the soul always thinks. Indeed, Descartes goes so far as to claim that he 'had reason to assert that the human soul, wherever it be, even in the mother's womb, is always thinking' (AT III:423; CSMK III:189).⁴ Locke critically responds to the Cartesian view that the soul is always thinking in *Essay* II.i.9–19.⁵

On this basis, let me introduce how Duncan interprets Locke's criticism:

The soul, Locke says, cannot think without being aware of it; but in dreamless sleep the soul is not aware of thinking; so sometimes (namely in dreamless sleep) the soul does not think. We might question the first premise of this argument, but Descartes would not. Using that premise, Locke thinks he can make this empirical argument that the Cartesian view that the mind is always thinking is false. (104–5)

The interpretation that Duncan offers in this passage suggests that Locke's argument can be analysed as follows:

- (1) The soul cannot think without being aware of it.
- (2) In dreamless sleep the soul is not aware of thinking.
- (3) Therefore, sometimes (namely in dreamless sleep) the soul does not think.

According to Duncan, '[t]he rest of Locke's discussion of whether the mind is always thinking concentrates on replying to responses to his argument' (105). Rather than accepting that there is dreamless sleep and periods during which the soul does not think, these responses seek to defend the Cartesian view that the soul always thinks and offer alternative views for why it appears to us as if there is dreamless sleep or periods during which the soul does not always think. The first response that Duncan considers concerns the possibility that the thoughts that the soul has during night-time are unconnected with the thoughts that the soul has during daytime, which might happen if the soul leaves the body at night-time and re-enters that body

⁴ References to Descartes's writings are to René Descartes, *Ouvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 12 vols. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–76), cited in the text as 'AT' followed by volume and page number. Additionally references are given to René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham et al., trans. John Cottingham et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), cited in the text as 'CSM' (for vols. 1 and 2) and 'CSMK' (for vol. 3), followed by volume and page number.

⁵ References are to John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 [1690]), cited in the text as 'Essay', followed by book, chapter, section number.

the next morning (see *Essay* II.i.12). The next response that Duncan mentions concerns the proposal ‘that we think while sleeping, but forget it afterwards’ (105).⁶ Duncan further shows how Locke replies to these responses and draws attention to the shortcomings that Locke identifies.

I have reservations about Duncan’s reconstruction of Locke’s argument against the Cartesian view that the soul always thinks. In the following I will offer an alternative way of analysing the dialectic of Locke’s arguments in *Essay* II.i.9–19.⁷ Duncan’s reconstruction assumes that Locke reaches the conclusion that sometimes the soul does not think before Locke turns to possible responses in *Essay* II.i.12 and subsequent sections. If Duncan is right, then one should expect to find a clear statement of this conclusion in *Essay* II.i.9–11. However, the statements that Locke makes there are more cautious. For instance, Locke writes:

I confess my self, to have one of those dull Souls, that doth not perceive it self always to contemplate *Ideas*, nor can conceive it any more necessary for the *Soul always to think*, than for the Body always to move; the perception of *Ideas* being (as I conceive) to the Soul, what motion is to the Body, not its Essence, but one of its Operations: And therefore, though thinking be supposed never so much the proper Action of the Soul; yet it is not necessary, to suppose, that it should be always thinking, always in Action. (*Essay* II.i.10)

Note that Locke’s claim here is that ‘it is not necessary, to suppose, that [the soul] be always thinking’. This claim is weaker than the conclusion Duncan draws.

Locke does not doubt that we sometimes think; indeed, he claims that we know this ‘certainly by Experience’ (*Essay* II.i.10). From this, Locke believes, we can infer infallibly, ‘That there is something in us, that has a Power to think’ (*Essay* II.i.10). However, it is a further question ‘whether that Substance perpetually thinks, or no’ (*Essay* II.i.10). In Locke’s view it is not self-evident whether the soul always thinks; nor can we demonstrate it. Thus, Locke believes that we must be guided by experience when we assess the question of whether the soul perpetually thinks.

Locke accuses Descartes and Cartesian philosophers who believe that the soul always thinks of assuming that the soul’s perpetual thinking is matter of fact, while it is merely a hypothesis:

⁶ See Locke, *Essay*, II.i.14–15.

⁷ The following analysis draws on Boeker, *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity*, 160–2.

But he, that would not deceive himself, ought to build his Hypothesis on matter of fact, and make it out by sensible experience, and not presume on matter of fact, because of his Hypothesis, that is, because he supposes it to be so: which way of proving, amounts to this, That I must necessarily think all last night, because another supposes I always think, though I my self cannot perceive, that I always do so. (*Essay* II.i.10)

The problem with the Cartesian view, as Locke sees it, is that the hypothesis that the soul always thinks needs to be proven before it can be taken for granted.

While Duncan claims that Locke endorses the opposite view, namely the view that the soul does not always think, I believe that it is better to treat both options as hypotheses. More precisely, my proposal is to distinguish the following two hypotheses:

(H1) The soul always thinks.

(H2) The soul does not always think.

Treating both options as hypotheses aligns well with Locke's approach to knowledge and probability in Book IV of the *Essay*. There Locke argues that the domain of knowledge is far more limited than commonly assumed. However, even if a proposition cannot be known with certainty, we can nevertheless examine its probability. This reading is further supported by the overall assessment that Locke offers in *Essay* II.i.18:

For the most that can be said of it, is, That 'tis possible the Soul may always think, but not always retain it in memory: And, I say, it is as possible, that the Soul may not always think; and much more probable, that it should sometimes not think, than that it should often think, and that a long while together, and not be conscious to it self the next moment after, that it had thought.

As I understand Locke, he never states whether (H1) is true or false, but rather he treats both (H1) and (H2) as hypotheses and assesses the probability of each. Although he acknowledges that (H1) may be possible, he regards (H2) as much more probable.

If this is correct, then it is worth reassessing what role the consideration in *Essay* II.i.12–17 play in Locke's engagement with the Cartesian view play. Here is my proposal of how these sections fit into the overall dialectic of Locke's arguments. In the opening sections in *Essay* II.i.9–10 Locke introduces the Cartesian view and argues that rather than regarding the view that

the soul perpetually thinks as a matter of fact it is merely a hypothesis. At this stage Locke regards it as an open question whether the soul always thinks or not, but raises a problem for Descartes and other philosophers who assume that the soul always thinks, namely to explain why it is the case that the soul does not remember many thoughts that it supposedly has during sleep (see *Essay* II.i.10–11). In the subsequent sections (see *Essay* II.i.11–17) Locke considers possible explanations that Cartesian philosophers could offer in support of (H1). Locke considers the following possible explanations:

(E1) Separate units of consciousness exist within the same soul.⁸

(E2) Thinking during sleep is immediately forgotten afterwards.⁹

(E3) Thinking during sleep involves innate ideas.¹⁰

After assessing the plausibility of each of these explanations, Locke regards neither of them as satisfying. On this basis, he reaches his overall assessment in *Essay* II.i.18 that (H1) is possible, but extremely unlikely and that the much more probably hypothesis is (H2), namely the view that the soul does not always think.

If my reconstruction is correct, then it follows that Locke merely offers probable arguments against the Cartesian view that the soul always thinks and does not directly reject it as false. In my view this is relevant, because it sheds light on type of metaphysical agnosticism that Locke endorses about the human mind. Locke does not entirely rule out Descartes's ontology of the human mind, but he regards other immaterialist accounts of the human mind as more plausible such as those developed by Cambridge Platonists. Yet Locke does not endorse such other immaterialist views either, because he regards it as possible that the human mind is material.

Duncan's book makes a major contribution to scholarship on the debates over materialism in seventeenth-century philosophy. He shows with clarity and depth how different philosophers challenge Hobbes's materialism and develop alternative views about the human mind, God, and surrounding philosophical issues. Duncan's study sheds new light on how Locke's philosophy responds to the earlier debates by Hobbes and Cambridge Platonist philosophers. All of this is clearly invaluable work, but I also see scope for future research on this topic, which expands on Duncan's work. One other philosopher who contributed to the seventeenth-century debates over materialism is Anne Conway. In chapter IX of her *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* Conway distances her philosophy not only from Descartes

⁸ See Locke, *Essay* II.i.11–12, 16.

⁹ See Locke, *Essay* II.i.14–15.

¹⁰ See Locke, *Essay* II.i.17.

but also from Hobbes. It would be worth examining how Conway's philosophy offers another criticism of Hobbes's materialism and how her philosophy can be integrated into the overall narrative that Duncan presents in his book.

Overall, I highly recommend this well-researched, engaging, and insightful book to anyone interested in early modern debates over materialism. I expect that it will be an important source for future scholarship on this topic.

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