Thinking Matter in Locke’s Proof of God’s Existence  
PATRICK J. CONNOLLY

Abbreviations

*Corr* E.S. de Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976-89)

*E* P.H. Nidditch (ed.), *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975)

*RR* G. Watson (ed.), *Remarks on John Locke by Thomas Burnet: With Locke’s Replies* (Doncaster: Brynmill, 1989)

*Works* *The Works of John Locke, A New Edition, Corrected*, 10 vols. (London, 1823)

Hence it is, that Mr. *L*’s meaning has been so *often mistaken*, and that he has not had the *good Luck to be everywhere rightly understood*, but more especially in this *Tenth Chapter*.

- William Carroll[[1]](#endnote-1)

1. INTRODUCTION

Locke famously claimed that if God superadded the power of thought to a material object then that object would be able to think. But did Locke believe it would be possible for a material object to think prior to any act of superaddition on God’s part? Could *mere* matter think? More precisely, did Locke believe that a material system might be able to think in virtue of its mechanical properties and the arrangement of its parts? Commentators almost universally claim that Locke denies just this possibility and they point to Book IV Chapter x (‘Of our Knowledge of the Existence of a GOD’) of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* to support their view.[[2]](#endnote-2) Further, many claim that this denial of the possibility of thinking matter is necessary if his argument for God’s existence in that chapter is to succeed. This paper disputes these claims. Interpreted properly, in *E* IV.x Locke does allow for the possibility that a material system could think prior to any act of superaddition. Further, this does not damage his argument for God’s existence. Instead, understanding that Locke allows for this possibility of thinking matter allows us to better understand the structure and force of his argument in that chapter.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The plan for the paper is to work systematically through the chapter analyzing Locke’s arguments as they arise in the text. Not every interesting feature of the chapter will be discussed.[[4]](#endnote-4) And I will for the most part ignore important criticisms that could be made of Locke’s proof.[[5]](#endnote-5) The focus will be on two primary goals. First, the paper will try to elucidate the *structure* of Locke’s arguments. Second, the paper will carefully examine Locke’s claims about thinking matter in the chapter. These two goals are not unrelated. As will become clear, Locke’s comments on thinking matter in *E* IV.x can only be understood properly when they are interpreted in light of the dialectic structure of the chapter. This requires close attention to the contexts in which the arguments he offers arise as well as close attention to the type of arguments he offers and the manner in which they are intended to work. Some of the observations and considerations below have been offered previously by other commentators.[[6]](#endnote-6) But even where this is the case I hope to analyze both Locke’s text and the arguments it contains more carefully and in greater depth than has been done before.

2. ARGUMENT FROM OUR OWN EXISTENCE

Locke’s argument for God’s existence is a cosmological argument. The starting point, the fact that will be explained through appeal to a necessitating cause, is our own existence.[[7]](#endnote-7) Locke claims that we know ‘by an intuitive Certainty’ that nothing cannot produce something (*E* IV.x.3: 620). The next move is to notice that we are thinking beings. Locke then uses a familiar, albeit controversial, claim about causation; we may call it Containment. Containment is an attempt to capture the idea that causes must be sufficient to account for their effects. Some early modern authors approach this through the claim that causes must be at least as perfect as their effects. Locke normally prefers to analyze this causal requirement in terms of powers. So, for him, Containment means that a cause must contain the powers had by its effect: ‘…it is evident, that what had its Being and Beginning from another, must also have all that which is in, and belongs to its Being from another too. All the Powers it has, must be owing to, and received from the same Source’ (*E* IV.x.4: 620).[[8]](#endnote-8) This principle, combined with the assertion that we are thinking beings, lets Locke claim that the object which produced us must be knowing and intelligent (*E* IV.x.4-5). Thus, it is: ‘as impossible, that Things wholly void of Knowledge, and operating blindly, without any Perception, should produce a knowing Being, as it is impossible that a Triangle should make it self three Angles bigger than two right ones’ (*E* IV.x.5: 620). So because there now exist thinking beings (us), and because a thinking being is required to produce another thinking being, Locke infers that there has always been a thinking being.[[9]](#endnote-9) This thinking being is meant to be God.

Locke does not need any theses about the possibility or impossibility of thinking matter here. He has relied on a premise about thinking; a version of Containment formulated in terms of thought. An entity must have the power of thought in order to create some other entity which also has the power of thought. But Locke has not yet mentioned anything about matter; the entire discussion has been confined to ‘beings’. So there is no assertion either way on matter’s ability to think.

At this point, Locke believes he has already accomplished the goal of the chapter; he has offered a successful deductive proof of God’s existence. *E* IV.x.6: 621 finds him proudly reporting that ‘The thing is evident’ and that ‘Reason leads us to the Knowledge of this certain and evident Truth’. But Locke also notes that the issue is of critical importance. Furthermore, there may be scores of atheists foolish enough to deny this clear bit of logic. Given this, Locke writes that it will be worth re-examining the argument.

3. SECOND ARGUMENT FROM OUR OWN EXISTENCE

Prior to offering the second version of the argument Locke makes a distinction between two types of being that exist in the world. Importantly, the distinction is *not* between material and thinking beings. Rather, it is between purely material beings *without sense* and thinking beings. Entities in the first category, like ‘the clippings of our Beards, and paring of our Nails’ are ‘without Sense, Perception, or Thought’ (*E* IV.x.9: 623).[[10]](#endnote-10) The second class of beings includes ‘Sensible, thinking, perceiving, Beings, such as we find our selves to be.’ (*E* IV.x.9: 623) Further, Locke suggests that the terms ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ are actually unhelpful and distracting in the current context. He prefers to talk about beings that are cogitative or incogitative.

This distinction occurs rather quickly in the text and tends to receive little attention from commentators.[[11]](#endnote-11) But for present purposes the distinction is an important one insofar as it shows Locke reworking some traditional categories in an interesting way. Locke is rejecting, or at least questioning, the Cartesian identification of the material with the incogitative and the immaterial with the cogitative. The labels ‘cogitative’ and ‘incogitative’ are neutral regarding the metaphysics underpinning cogitation. Locke is content here to allow that *some* purely material beings are certainly incogitative. And he also commits himself to the existence of cogitative beings. But this leaves open the question of whether there are any material beings that do not fall into the first category of purely material beings without sense. Are there any material cogitative beings for Locke? Nothing in the passage settles this question either way. The important point is just that Locke’s distinction opens up a conceptual possibility.

This point comes out very clearly in an exchange of letters between Locke and Phillip van Limborch. Johannes Hudde, a Cartesian thinker and important Dutch politician, had pushed Limborch for information on Locke’s arguments for God’s existence. Limborch mentioned that Locke might consider omitting the word ‘incorporeal’ from his views, as it could upset Cartesian sensibilities. Locke refuses to do so:

…if I recognized that Mr. H is a Cartesian, the term ‘incorporeal’ or ‘immaterial’ would not on that account have to be omitted from the definition of God since whoever wants to think rightly about God ought to remove all matter or corporeity from Him. *‘Cogitation’* *certainly does not do this,* whatever the men devoted to Descartes’s opinions suppose to the contrary. (Locke to van Limborch, 4 April 1698. *Corr* 6: 365, emphasis added)[[12]](#endnote-12)

Here we see Locke, in the context of discussing proofs of God’s existence, refusing to identify the cogitative with the immaterial. Simply affirming that God thinks is not enough to establish that he is immaterial. And we see him self-consciously recognizing that his distinction between cogitative and incogitative upsets the traditional Cartesian framework.

Following this distinction between two types of being Locke repeats the argument from the previous section at *E.* IV.x.10. The components and structure of the argument are familiar. If there is an eternal being, then it must be cogitative. Why? Because there are cogitative beings now (namely, ourselves). And something incogitative could never produce something cogitative (because of Containment).[[13]](#endnote-13) Here is how this second iteration of the argument plays out in the text:

If then there must be something eternal, let us see what sort of Being it must be. And to that, it is very obvious to Reason, that it must necessarily be a *cogitative* Being. For it is as impossible to conceive, that ever bare incogitative Matter should produce a thinking intelligent Being, as that nothing should of it self produce Matter. (*E* IV.x.10: 623)

We can begin our analysis of this passage at the end. Matter cannot come from nothing. Nothing has no ‘being’ to give; it lacks even the limited perfections of matter. So some creator entity must exist which can explain the existence of material beings. By parallel reasoning, non-thinking beings could not be responsible for thinking beings. This follows from Containment. So whatever created thinking beings like us must itself be a thinking being. Just as Locke claims, there is a clear parallel between these two arguments.

Locke’s addition of the qualifier ‘incogitative’ to matter in the above passage is critical. It reminds us that Locke’s comments here must be read in light of the distinction that he has just made between cogitative and incogitative beings. Using Locke’s own examples will help to illustrate the force of his argument; it is impossible to conceive that beard trimmings and fingernail clippings could produce a human mind. Locke has still not relied on any controversial premises about the ability or inability of matter to think. He has not claimed that no material being could produce a thinking being. Instead, he has only asserted that an *incogitative* material being could not produce a cogitative being.

4. TWO SENSES OF ‘PRODUCTION’

Later in this section (*E* IV.x.10) we get a critical passage for those who think that Locke denies the possibility of thinking matter:

But let us suppose Motion eternal too; yet Matter, *incogitative Matter* and Motion, whatever changes it might produce of figure and Bulk, *could never produce Thought*: Knowledge will still be as far beyond the Power of Motion and Matter to produce, as Matter is beyond the Power of *nothing*, or *non-entity* to produce. (*E* IV.x.10: 623)[[14]](#endnote-14)

At first glance, it may look as though Locke here denies that matter is capable of thinking. The goal of this section is to argue that this passage does not have to be read in this way. In fact, there are good reasons for resisting this reading.

Part of the difficulty here is with the word ‘produce.’ To twenty-first century ears ‘matter cannot produce thought’ sounds like a straightforward denial of the possibility of thinking matter. But the issue is not so clear. The word ‘produce’ is ambiguous between two different senses. Specifically, it can refer to *constitution* or to *creation*. Consider the difference between the following two sentences:

1. A large number of water droplets approaching the shore produce a tsunami.

2. An underwater earthquake produces a tsunami.

The first sentence invokes a sense of ‘production’ which is something like give rise to, constitute, or serve as a basis for. Going forward I will refer to this as production1. Thus, we might say that a number of atoms arranged appropriately produces1 a table, that a certain number of people in a room produces1 a quorum, or that the right ingredients mixed together and baked produce1 a cake. To take the controversial case, we might say that a collections of neurons working together produce1 consciousness. The second sentence invokes a sense of ‘production’ which is closer to creation or generation. Going forward we can refer to this as production2. Thus we might say that a factory produces2 toys or that a garden produces2 vegetables. Returning to the controversial case, it would be less appropriate to intend this sense of ‘production’ when saying neurons produce2 consciousness.[[15]](#endnote-15)

So when Locke writes that matter cannot produce thought, the most important question is whether he means production1 or production2. If he is means the former then it seems correct to say that he is denying the possibility of thinking matter. But if he means the latter, then it seems that he is continuing to keep open the possibility of a material cogitative being.

There are five compelling reasons for reading Locke as meaning production2 in this passage. First, we should emphasize the context of the passage. If Locke means production2, then he can just be read as reiterating a point that he has already made twice in the chapter. The point is just that something that is incogitative cannot be responsible for creating something cogitative. This gives us an explanation for why Locke needs to add the qualifier ‘incogitative’ to matter in this passage. The claim simply would not go through without it. Still focusing on the argumentative context, Locke’s marginal headings offer insight into what he took to be the central philosophical move of each section. They read as follows:

*E* IV.x.9: *Two sorts of Beings, Cogitative and Incogitative*  
*E* IV.x.10: *Incogitative Being Cannot Produce a Cogitative*  
*E* IV.x.11-12: *Therefore there has been an eternal Wisdom*   
*E* IV.x.13: *Whether material or no*

So the interpretation of *E* IV.x.10 offered above fits squarely with Locke’s own account of what transpires in the section. And these marginal headings also give us good reason to think that Locke does not intend, in *E* IV.x.10, to tell us anything about whether matter can think. This is because the marginal headings suggest that up until at least *E* IV.x.13 Locke thinks the issue is not decided. He will only begin to consider whether the eternal thinking being is material or immaterial in that later section.

Second, and related to this point about argumentative context, it bears repeating that Locke is offering a *cosmological* argument in this section. He is asking whether the thing responsible for his existence is a thinking being or a non-thinking being. So it is production2 that is at stake. We get a clear sense of this when Locke sets up the central issue at the beginning of the chapter: ‘…Since what was not from Eternity, had a Beginning; and what had a Beginning, must be *produced* by something else’ (*E* IV.x.3: 620, emphasis added). The cosmological character of Locke’s argument is also clear in the sentence that follows immediately after his claim that incogitative matter could never produce thought: ‘And I appeal to every one’s own Thoughts, whether he cannot as easily conceive Matter produced by *nothing*, as Thought to be produced by pure Matter, *when before there was no such thing as Thought, or an intelligent Being existing*’ (*E* IV.x.10: 623, emphasis added). If Locke were merely denying that matter was capable of thinking there would be no need for this final clause. The issue could be settled without it. But if Locke’s concerns are about creation, about production2, then this last clause is vital. It is inconceivable that (unthinking) matter could be responsible for thinking beings like ourselves if we do not posit a pre-existing thinking being that could give a system of matter these complex powers of thought.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Third, Locke draws a parallel in this section between matter producing thought and nothing producing something. If we read Locke as simply denying the possibility of thinking matter, that is to say, if we read him as using production1 rather than production2, this parallel will be difficult to understand. In continually mentioning the impossibility of nothing producing something Locke is appealing to the venerable ‘ex nihilo nihil fit.’ The idea here is not that nothing never constitutes something, rather the idea is that nothing never generates anything.[[17]](#endnote-17) The comparison of matter and thought to nothing and something will only make sense if we take Locke to have production2 in mind.

The fourth and fifth reasons for reading Locke as meaning production2 have to do with linguistic subtleties in the section. In this section Locke remarks that matter does not have the power to move itself without an external cause. Intriguingly, Locke makes this point three times and each time he writes that matter could never produce motion *in itself*. But when Locke turns his discussion to matter and motion producing thought he leaves off this qualifier. Had he written that matter in motion cannot produce thought *in itself*, production1 would seem to be appropriate. This would be the clearest way to deny that matter could think. But in the absence of the qualifier Locke seems to be suggesting that matter and motion cannot create a *new* thinking being. Further, Locke does write many times that matter and motion could never produce thought. But Locke does not write in this section that matter and motion cannot think. Again, if Locke intended to deny the possibility of thinking matter in this section, it would have been easy to claim that matter in motion cannot think. But in the absence of this claim, we have reason to look for other ways to understand his assertion that matter in motion cannot produce thought.

What does this mean for thinking matter? It is still open to Locke to believe that a suitably arranged system of matter could constitute a thinking being. This is especially true if Locke also believed that thinking beings constituted by matter would be incapable of creating other thinking things. There is good evidence that Locke endorsed this second claim. Certainly, thinking beings like us are incapable of creating other thinking things *ex nihilo*.[[18]](#endnote-18) And Locke seems to accept it as an empirical fact that thinking things like us are unable to fashion other thinking things out of the materials God has provided us with.[[19]](#endnote-19) So it is still open to Locke to believe that matter could think. Consider an analogy. We all believe that leather, string, and rubber can, if situated appropriately, produce1 a shoe. Those items can *be* a shoe. But we also believe that those items (even if arranged into a shoe) cannot produce2 other shoes. Factories or people, and not leather, strings, and rubber, produce2 shoes. So this controversial passage from *E* IV.x.10, interpreted correctly, is compatible with a commitment to the possibility of thinking matter.

5. THE ‘MILL ARGUMENT’

*E* IV.x.10 also contains a passage that many have seen as similar to Leibniz’s famous Mill Argument.[[20]](#endnote-20) Locke says that we can consider matter to be any shape or size that we please but that it will always behave in the same manner. Individual particles will still only be capable of colliding with one another and producing changes in motion and position. And Locke says that we certainly cannot understand how this could produce ‘Sense, Thought, and Knowledge’ (*E* IV.x.10: 624).

This passage is one of the most difficult in the chapter for the argument of this paper. Before tackling it directly, however, it is worth taking a step back and recalling the context in which it appears. A primary reason for believing that Locke does not deny the possibility of thinking matter here has to do with what occurs in the rest of the chapter. In later sections of *E* IV.x Locke continues to consider the possibility of thinking matter very carefully. As mentioned in the previous section, his marginal headings suggest he does not even intend to address the question until *E* IV.x.13. If it is the case that Locke here in *E* IV.x.10 denies that matter can think, then these later passages become very difficult to explain. Put differently, any interpretation which has Locke continuing to consider something as a real possibility only a few sections after he asserts that it is incoherent bears a serious explanatory burden. But these arguments are indirect. Further, they are contingent on arguments that will be made later in the paper. It is necessary to analyze the passage directly.

An initial question to ask is what Locke hopes to achieve in this part of *E* IV.x.10. Why does he reflect on very small bits of matter and what they might tell us about the prospects for matter producing thought? Here is the sentence that precedes these considerations: ‘I appeal to every one’s own Thoughts, whether he cannot as easily conceive Matter produced by *nothing*, as Thought to be produced by pure Matter, where before there was no such thing as Thought, or an intelligent Being existing’ (*E* IV.x.10: 623). So at the outset of the passage it is clear that Locke still has his cosmological concerns in mind. He is asking whether or not matter is capable of producing2 a thinking being.

This fact about Locke’s aim in the section must be kept in mind when we arrive at sentences like the following: ‘[Particles of matter] knock, impel, and resist one another, just as the great do, and that is all they can do’ (*E* IV.x.10: 624). Of course, it is very tempting to read Locke here as claiming that all particles of matter can do is bump into one another, meaning that they cannot also think. So Locke might mean that particles of matter cannot produce1 a thinking thing. But, given the context, and given what Locke would expect his readers to have on their minds if they were closely following the argument, he could be read differently. He could be read as saying that all particles of matter do is bump into one another, meaning they cannot also create a new thinking being, or any new being for that matter. So Locke could again just be denying that matter can produce2 a thinking being. And this would make good sense given the larger dialectical structure of the section.

Whatever Locke hopes to accomplish in this second part of *E* IV.x.10 there is one argument that we should be very careful *not* to attribute to him. Locke cannot simply be claiming that we do not understand how a material substance could be a thinking substance and therefore we are justified in concluding that matter is incapable of thought. This way of denying the possibility of thinking matter is entirely at odds Locke’s other considered commitments.

After all, Locke is adamant that we have no understanding how it is that *any* substance, material or immaterial, could think. We simply cannot conceive how a substance could give rise to thought. He discusses this point at *E* II.xxiii.28: 312:

…I think, we have as many, and as clear *Ideas* belonging to Spirit, as we have belonging to Body, the Substance of each being equally unknown to us; and the *Idea* of Thinking in Spirit, as clear as of Extension in Body…. Constant Experience makes us sensible of both of these, though our narrow Understandings can comprehend neither. For when the Mind would look beyond those original *Ideas* we have from Sensation or Reflection, and penetrate into their Causes, and manner of production, we find still it discovers nothing but its own short-sightedness.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Given this, it is not open to Locke to simply deny that matter is capable of thought without some further argument or consideration.

Locke’s views on this point become clearer when we consider his manuscript replies to the author of the 1697 *Remarks Upon an Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*.[[22]](#endnote-22) This author wrote a number of pamphlets critiquing various aspects of the *Essay*.[[23]](#endnote-23) He consistently attacks the idea that matter could be capable of thought by arguing that we cannot understand how matter could think. Locke is unfazed by this challenge. His strategy, which he employs a number of times in this controversy, is to flip the explanatory burden:

All the same difficulties are against the conceiving how an immaterial created substance can begin, change or stop its own motion or thoughts, or give any motion or determination to body. … When you have demonstrated human souls to be immaterial, and explained how these powers are in them, you have said something against me and shall find me your glad convert… (*RR* 80)[[24]](#endnote-24)

Locke was confident that the nature of thought and the manner of its production1 were deep mysteries. And he did not believe that it was easier to understand how an immaterial substance could be a thinking thing than it was to understand how a material substance could be a thinking thing: ‘Pray tell me how you conceive cogitation in an unsolid created substance. It is as hard, I confess, to me to be conceived in an unsolid as in a solid substance.’ (*RR* 85) Locke’s point is that we must be careful to avoid arguments from ignorance; our inability to conceive of something does not entail its impossibility.

So those who want to read Locke as denying the possibility of thinking matter at *E* IV.x.10 face a serious problem. Because he rejects conceivability as a guide to possibility, Locke’s argument cannot simply be that matter giving rise to thought is inconceivable to us. Either there must be some more sophisticated argument present in the passage or there must be some other explanation for what Locke is doing in the passage. I believe it will be difficult to draw a more sophisticated argument out of the passage.[[25]](#endnote-25) Locke’s considered view is that we can only deny the possibility of metaphysical theses that contain a perceived contradiction.[[26]](#endnote-26) And though we cannot clearly conceive of how a system of matter could think in virtue of the arrangement of its parts and their mechanical properties, it is not at all clear that there is a *contradiction* in the idea of this type of system constituting a thinking thing.[[27]](#endnote-27) So it behooves us to consider some other explanation for what Locke may be doing in the passage. One possible explanation, mentioned above, is that Locke is just elaborating on the argument offered earlier in the chapter. Another possibility is that in this section Locke is offering a first pass at the arguments that he will consider more carefully in *E* IVx.13-17. He is considering whether matter and motion could be sufficient to account for an eternal thinking being. But he does this in much greater detail and with much greater care in these later sections. So it may just be that *E* IV.x.10 does not present Locke’s considered views on this issue.[[28]](#endnote-28)

6. A DIALECTICAL TURN

In *E* IV.x.11 Locke offers yet another summary of his argument, concluding that incogitative matter could not have produced cogitative beings and that there must therefore be an eternal cogitative being. But at *E* IV.x.12 the dialectic of the chapter shifts. Locke now says that he will consider possible objections to his argument.

In *E* IV.x.13 Locke writes that though everyone will be forced to admit that he has established the existence of an eternal cogitative being, there may still be a question about whether this eternal cogitative being is material or immaterial. That Locke is willing to consider this question in *E* IV.x.13 is important. As mentioned above, it poses a serious problem for those who assert that Locke denies the possibility of thinking matter at *E* IV.x.10. Had the possibility been so easily dismissed three sections before, it is hard to see why Locke would bring it up here. And it is particularly hard to see why he would give the question the particular treatment he does.

Locke’s response to the question of whether the eternal cogitative being might be material is highly instructive: ‘Let it be so; it equally still follows, that there is a God. For if there be an Eternal, Omniscient, Omnipotent Being, it is certain, that there is a God, whether you imagine that Being to be material, or no.’ (*E* IV.x.13: 625) This is quite striking; there is nothing *prima facie* wrong with the idea of a material cogitative God. Locke does not assert that the idea of a being that is both material and cogitative is contradictory. He does not think that the hypothesis of a material thinking God is worthy of ridicule, outrage, or outright dismissal.[[29]](#endnote-29) Most importantly, he gives no sign that he thinks anything that has come before *E* IV.x.13 in this chapter could have already settled the question. Instead, he claims that as long as the proponents of a material God allow their God to be eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent they have an adequate conception of the deity.

At this stage, Locke argues that the primary problem with belief in a material God is *practical* rather than *theoretical*. He makes the case for this practical problem in *E* IV.x.13. For ease of discussion, we may refer to the position that God is a material being as *hylotheism*.[[30]](#endnote-30) Why does Locke believe that the hylotheist will run into trouble? The problem has to do with certain psychological dispositions human beings are prone to. If the hylotheist believes that God is material, then she will probably believe that all things are material. Once she has this belief she will be likely to forget the argument for God’s existence. Then she will use the premise that everything is material to deny that God exists. In summary, the hylotheist will be prone to equivocate over the definition of God, first allowing that God could be material, then denying that God could be material. But, as noted above, this is merely a practical reason for rejecting hylotheism; there is no ‘in principle’ problem with the view. So at the end of *E* IV.x.13 Locke seems to consider seriously the possibility that there might exist a material thinking being. The idea cannot be immediately dismissed.

It is helpful to reflect on Locke’s pragmatic critique of hylotheism in *E.* IV.x.13 in light of his distinction between cogitative and incogitative beings in *E* IV.x.9. Recall that Locke’s division was between cogitative and incogitative beings and that this left open the possibility that there might be cogitative material beings. This is the possibility initially seized on by the hylotheist. But Locke thinks something will go wrong. He thinks the old (Cartesian) distinction will reassert itself in the psychology of the hylotheist. The hylotheist will revert to believing that no material thing could be a thinking thing and, in doing so, will cease to believe that God exists. Locke’s claims about the alleged psychological dispositions of the hylotheist do not strike me as particularly convincing. And I have been unable to discover any instances of seventeenth-century authors falling prey to this sort of error. So it is unclear whether Locke has specific targets in mind or whether he is merely speculating. That said, the critique of hylotheism is interesting because it offers us some insight into the way Locke understands the distinctions between material and immaterial, on the one hand, and cogitative and incogitative, on the other. Specifically, this critique shows that Locke thought the Cartesian framework which identifies material with incogitative and immaterial with cogitative exerts a tremendously strong pull on us. This framework is our ‘default’ way of thinking about these issues. And when we attempt to depart from this framework we must be very careful lest we fall back into it and generate confusion.

7. THOUGHT VS. KNOWLEDGE

After sketching out these pragmatic psychological difficulties facing hylotheism, Locke considers the position in greater detail. Ultimately, Locke thinks that hylotheism is not a tenable position for philosophical reasons. It can safely be rejected on rational, rather than merely practical, grounds. My contention, however, is that Locke does not think hylotheism should be rejected because matter is incapable of thinking. His reasons for rejecting hylotheism are compatible with a belief in the possibility of thinking matter.

The most important texts for our purposes come at *E* IV.x.16 and *E* IV.x.17. We will consider these sections in turn. In *E* IV.x.16 Locke begins his consideration of the most philosophically defensible formulation of hylotheism. This version holds that God is a complicated system of matter. Locke rejects this possibility. But he does not do so by claiming that a complicated system of matter would be incapable of thought. His reasoning is more involved. Understanding the explanatory burden that Locke places on the hylotheist is essential for interpreting the passage correctly. Locke notes that the hylotheists need their system of matter to account not just for thought, but rather for ‘all the Wisdom and Knowledge of that eternal Being’ (*E* IV.x.16: 627). This is what mere matter is incapable of doing: ‘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.’ (*E* IV.x.16: 627). The problem is not that matter cannot think; the problem is that matter could never think thoughts as good as God’s.

Of course, one might object, Locke has just said that a new relation of position could not give thought and knowledge to matter. But, if we take Locke’s words in their strict logical sense this is compatible with a new relation of position giving *thought* to matter. We might say that the vending machine in the philosophy department is incapable of dispensing root beer and root beer floats, even if it is capable of dispensing root beer. Or I might believe that a teenager is very good at algebra, without believing that she is very good at algebra and calculus. So perhaps Locke is open to the idea that mere matter in motion can think, even though mere matter cannot have complicated thoughts that would count as knowledge or wisdom. Initially, this might seem to put too fine a point on what Locke may have intended as a broader claim. But, as will be discussed below, the next section in the chapter has Locke go on to consider just this possibility: that a system of matter could have thought but not knowledge. So, other things being equal, we should prefer an interpretation of *E* IV.x.16 that retains this view as a live option.

Suppose the objector is not convinced by the argument offered in the previous paragraph. Two further considerations should help to persuade her that Locke does not, in this passage, deny the possibility that matter could think in virtue of its mechanical properties. First, in this passage Locke seems to make the thought dependent on the *static* relational position of particles. But he can certainly deny that different configurations of matter at rest could account for thought while still allowing that thought could depend on the motions and processes that occur in a dynamic active system.[[31]](#endnote-31) Importantly, this latter view is just the position he goes on to consider in the next section. Second, Locke claims that thought and knowledge would not be given ‘to them’ which suggests thought and knowledge would not be given *to the individual particles*. But this is perfectly compatible with thought and knowledge being given to *the system* of particles.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Admittedly, these strategies for reading the passage may seem to stretch the obvious sense of Locke’s words. But Locke himself offers justification for emphasizing the dialectic structure of the argument over the precise formulations he offers in it. When discussing the possibility of thinking matter in correspondence with William Molyneux, Locke himself worried that his meaning might be mistaken. He worries that his assertion at E IV.iii..6 that we might be thinking material beings, combined with his claims in *E* IV.x ‘may, to an unwary reader, seem to contain a contradiction’ (Locke to Molyneux, 20 January 1693. *Corr* 4: 624). According to Locke, Molyneux was smart enough to see that there was not one. Locke’s worry, though, was that he could not rely on all of his readers to ‘read me with that judgment you do, and observe the design and foundation of what I say, rather than stick barely in the words…’ (Locke to Molyneux, 20 January 1693. *Corr* 4: 624)[[33]](#endnote-33) So there is a danger in focusing just on the bare sense of Locke’s words. They should be interpreted in light of his overarching goal in the section.

Locke’s comments on thinking matter are of tremendous interest to scholars. This is for good reason; his effort to make room for the possibility of thinking matter is among the more intriguing aspects of his philosophical system. As a result, scholars are eager to seize on any passage in Locke’s corpus that might help to flesh out this aspect of his thought. The worry, however, is that in doing so they run the risk of missing the forest for the trees. Isolating passages in which Locke mentions thinking matter from their immediate context and reading them in light of debates in the secondary literature risks distracting us from the fact that Locke is not making claims about thinking things in general, but only about a thinking thing *like God*.

So with Locke’s concerns about the ‘design and foundation’ of his argument in mind we may return to the specific context of his argument. Locke has said that a change of position cannot give thought and knowledge to matter. It has been suggested that we read this as Locke denying that *intelligent* thought could be the product of unthinking particles moving about. Others have sought to read this as the stronger claim that matter cannot think. Here is the passage in full:

For to suppose the eternal thinking Being, to be nothing else but a composition of Particles of Matter, each whereof is incogitative, is to ascribe all the Wisdom and Knowledge of that eternal Being, only to the *juxta*-position of parts; than which nothing can be more absurd. 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. (*E* IVx.16: 627)

It can be tempting to read the second sentence as containing something like the following argument: it is inconceivable that the juxtaposition of unthinking particles could give rise to thought, therefore the juxtaposition of unthinking particles cannot give rise to thought. But, as discussed earlier, this cannot be Locke’s argument. Locke denies that conceivability is a reliable guide to possibility. So our inability to conceive of a material thinking system cannot be playing a key role in the argument of this passage.

But if Locke isn’t denying the possibility of thinking matter in the second sentence of this passage, what is he doing? I suggest we can get greater traction on this sentence by reading it in light of the one that precedes it. After all, Locke begins the second sentence with the word ‘for’ indicating that he is offering justification for the claim made in the first sentence. Importantly, the question of whether or not matter can think is simply not at stake in this first sentence. Instead, the question is whether matter can be God, whether it can have God’s eternal knowledge and wisdom. This is the point we should be looking for Locke to address in the second sentence. And, presumably, this is the point he would expect his readers to have in mind in the second sentence. Denying that matter can have omniscience is a long way from denying that matter can think.

Thinking about the larger context of Locke’s remarks is also important because it can help to shine light on the plausibility of his argument. At this stage in the chapter Locke understands himself to be arguing against the hylotheist. The hylotheist claim is that God is a complex system of matter which gives rise to thought. It would be a pretty shabby argumentative move on Locke’s part to counter the hylotheist by denying that matter could think. Surely a naked assertion that matter was incapable of thought would fail to convince Locke’s opponents. This would just be to beg the question against their position. And surely Locke would have recognized this. If nothing else, we have reason to hope that there is more to Locke’s argument than a *petitio principii*.

At *E* IV.x.17 Locke continues to consider the possibility that God might be a system of moving particles. The mere existence of this section provides further support for the interpretation of *E* IV.x.16 offered above. Had Locke simply denied that matter was capable of thought at *E* IV.x.16 then the discussion could have ended. The hylotheist would have been defeated and there would be no need to continue discussing the view; if Locke denies that matter can think at *E* IV.x.16 then the idea that God is a system of matter would be a non-starter. But Locke presses on. Arguably, this is because he is attempting to offer a more complete discussion of the argument gestured at toward the end of *E* IV.x.16.

In *E* IV.x.17 Locke asks whether the material God under consideration could have thoughts that depend on the motion of particles:

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, being each of them in it self without any Thought, cannot regulate its own Motions, much less be regulated by the Thought of the whole; since that Thought is not the cause of Motion...but the consequence of it, whereby Freedom, Power, Choice, and all rational and wise thinking or acting will be quite taken away... (*E* IV.x.17: 627)

Here again, the problem with a material God is *not* that matter is incapable of thought. In fact, Locke seems to allow for the cogency of the suggestion that a system of matter can think. By writing that ‘all the thoughts there must be unavoidably accidental’ he indicates that he finds it conceivable that there *are* or *could be* thoughts in such a system. The problem is that a system of matter without any guidance will not be very good at thinking. As Locke says, its thought will be accidental and limited. There will be nothing like the unity of consciousness and complex powers of memory, composition, and abstraction found in humans. And there will certainly be nothing like the omniscience and providential concern found in God.

The paraphrase of the argument offered in Henry Lee’s *Anti-Scepticism* (1702) allows for a deeper analysis of the way it is meant to work:

Nor 3*dly*, could that eternal knowing being be any certain system of Particles of Matter, whether at rest or in motion; … if in Motion, then [its] Thoughts would wholly depend on Motion, and those thoughts would be unavoidably accidental and limited, since all the Particles which make up this System being each of them without Thought, they could not regulate their own Motions, because the Thought would not precede the Motion, but the motion would precede the thought, much less could they regulate the whole.[[34]](#endnote-34)

As noted above, a system of thinking matter that was unguided, unable to control or regulate its movements, would be very bad at thinking. And it certainly could not be expected to embody the wisdom found in God. Lee helpfully emphasizes the reason for the lack of guidance or self-control in this type of system. The key point is that the thought in such a system would be *dependent on* and *posterior to* the motions. This means that the thought could not in any way be responsible for the motions. In fact, the opposite would be the case. And this is what entitles Locke to the claim that the system’s thoughts would be accidental and limited.

Here, finally, we have Locke presenting a serious argument that God could not be a material being. It is a serious argument both from the perspective of Locke himself and from the perspective of his opponents. From his own perspective, we can now see why Locke understands the idea of a material God to be contradictory. For reasons discussed above, Locke cannot simply claim, as Descartes and his followers do, that there is a contradiction between *thought* and *matter*. But it is open to Locke, and highly plausible, to claim that there is a contradiction between *organized* thought and *accidental* motions of matter.

With these considerations about the ungoverned and accidental motions of matter in mind we are in a position to shed some light on claims Locke makes earlier in the chapter. At *E* IV.x.5: 620 Locke writes that is impossible that ‘Things wholly void of Knowledge, *and operating blindly*, and without any Perception, should produce a knowing Being…’ (emphasis added). In the next section Locke pushes back against the idea that humans could be the ‘product of mere ignorance and *chance*; and that all the rest of the Universe acted only by that *blind hap-hazard*…’ (*E* IV.x.6: 621, emphasis added). It is now clear why these concerns about arbitrariness surface so early in the chapter, even if they do not get fully resolved until *E* IV.x.17. In a similar vein, we can better appreciate the explanatory burden Locke’s places on the hylotheist at the end of *E* IV.x.10: 624. What is required is not merely a thinking material being, but one intelligent enough to produce ‘that order, harmony, and beauty which is to be found in Nature.’

From the perspective of Locke’s opponents this argument shows Locke doing more than begging the question. A hylotheist would have to take this argument seriously because it grants the basic assumption that underlies their view; the argument grants that matter could be capable of thought. Locke’s argument asks for a defense of a different, and much shakier, assumption. A traditional Epicurean view held that the random collisions of particles give rise to thought.[[35]](#endnote-35) This is what Locke is calling into question. And this is why the hylotheist would need to reply to Locke’s argument.[[36]](#endnote-36)

8. GOD AND MAN

If the arguments of the previous section are correct then Locke nowhere in *E* IV.x denies that matter is capable of thought. Two questions must now be addressed. What does this mean for the ontology of human beings? What does this mean for the proof of God’s existence in that chapter?

If Locke does think that a system of mere matter could think, one might wonder whether humans are purely material things. Of course, Locke has claimed that a mere material system on its own would not think very well. All of its thoughts would be ‘accidental and limited.’ Humans, by contrast, display highly complex and ordered patterns of thought. But Locke only invoked the point about accidental and limited thought in order to show that the *first* thinking thing could not be material. Once God is posited, the prospects for material thinking beings change radically. Locke’s claim was that unguided matter, matter unable to control itself, would not think very much or very well. But surely God could provide just the needed guidance. So, if we allow God’s existence then we can also allow that God might create fully material thinking beings.

There is an important lesson here for the proper understanding of superaddition in Locke’s thought. Locke is clear that if humans are purely material then God must have superadded the power of thought to the systems of matter that compose them. This paper has endeavored to help make clear why Locke believed this to be the case. But commentators are split on what this act of superaddition would entail. Some have argued for a ‘reductionist’ interpretation of superaddition according to which it just involves the organization of material particles and determination of their motions. Others have argued, in part based on a certain reading of *E* IV.x, that superaddition must consist in God either altering the essence of matter or in God giving material systems independent powers unrelated to their real essences. This paper shows that, properly interpreted, *E* IV.x is compatible with reductionist understandings of superaddition. God superadding thought to a system of matter might involve nothing more than structuring and organizing the matter in such way that its latent powers are actualized. But, of course, superaddition could instead involve alterations to the essence of matter or God endowing systems of matter with special, independent properties. There is nothing in *E* IV.x that settles the issue either way.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Does Locke’s proof of God’s existence require him to deny that matter can think? If the arguments above are correct then it does not. He is able to provide an argument for the existence of an eternal, wise, beneficent, and (importantly) immaterial God. And nowhere in this argument is he forced to rely on the bare assertion that matter cannot think. Instead, he can rely on what was then a widely-accepted causal axiom to show that God exists and on a series of considerations about what thinking matter would be like to show that God cannot be material.

9. CONCLUSION

At many points in both his written work and public life Locke walked a very fine line on matters of religious orthodoxy. In *E* IV.x we see him walking this line at one of its finest points. Locke, obviously aware of the stakes, crafted this chapter particularly carefully. It gives the outward impression of orthodoxy and seems to assert that human beings cannot be material things. But if the arguments offered above are correct Locke never actually commits himself to this, and he must have recognized that like-minded readers would notice.

One might take this reading of *E* IV.x as evidence for the claim that Locke was secretly a materialist regarding the ontology of human beings. I think this would be a mistake. My own view is that Locke was a committed and principled agnostic on the ontology of human beings. The arguments of this paper are an attempt to render that agnosticism consistent and show how it was possible. My hope is that they might also give us reason to admire the subtlety and sophistication of Locke’s thought and the careful intricacies of his writing.[[38]](#endnote-38)

*Lehigh University*

1. W. Carroll, *A Dissertation Upon the Tenth Chapter of the Fourth Book of Mr. Locke’s* Essay Concerning Humane Understanding [*Dissertation*] (London, 1706), 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Yolton offers a succinct version of the view: ‘It is in this chapter [*E* IV.x] that Locke conclusively shows that he did not accept the notion that matter can think.’ J. Yolton, *A Locke Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 134. See also J. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 17 and J. Yolton, *The Two Intellectual Worlds of John Locke* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 70. For a sampling of concurring opinions see M. Stuart, ‘Locke on Superaddition and Mechanism’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 6 (1998), 351-79, at 365, N. Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), 98, M. Rozemond and G. Yaffe, ‘Peach Trees, Gravity, and God: Mechanism in Locke’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 12 (2004), 387-412, at 405, A. Pavelich, ‘Locke on the Possibility of Thinking Matter’, *Locke Studies*, 5 (2005), 101-26, at 106, T. Ryan, ‘Bayle’s Critique of Lockean Superaddition’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 36 (2006), 511-34, at 513, L. Downing, ‘Locke’s Ontology’, in L. Newman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 352-80, at 353, W. Ott, ‘Locke’s Exclusion Argument’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 27 (2010), 181-96, at 190, V. Nuovo, ‘Locke’s Argument Against the Epicureans’ [‘Epicureans’], in V. Nuovo (ed.), *Christianity, Antiquity, and Enlightenment: Interpretations of Locke* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 207-34, at 223, and A.J. Pyle, *Locke* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 110-1. Even commentators sympathetic to the view that Locke was a materialist about the ontology of humans admit that these passages pose serious difficulties. See, for example, M. Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* [*Locke*] (New York: Routledge, 1991), vol. 2, ch. 14, P. Hamou, ‘L’Opinion de Locke sur la “Matière Pensante”’, in P. Anstey (ed.), *John Locke: Critical Assessment* (New York: Routledge), vol. 3, and N. Jolly, *Locke’s Touchy Subjects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Going forward in the paper, except where otherwise noted, I shall use general language about the possibility of thinking matter to refer to the specific possibility of a material system thinking in virtue of the arrangement of its parts and their mechanical properties apart from any act of superaddition on God’s part. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For example, tantalizing passages like Locke’s guarded critique of Descartes at *E* IV.x.7: 621-2 and speculations about creation *ex nihilo* at *E* IV.x.18: 628-9 will receive no attention. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For some of these see J. Bennett, ‘God and Matter in Locke: An Exposition of *Essay* 4.10’, in C. Mercer and E. O’Neill (eds.), *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 161-82 or Ayers, *Locke*, vol. 2, 182-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Notably, the analysis of *E* IV.x.17 offered below in Section 7 is structurally similar the one given in Ayers, *Locke*, vol. 2, ch. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In this respect Locke’s argument is, perhaps, a slightly unusual version of the cosmological argument. More commonly these arguments take the world or universe (*cosmos*) as their starting point. Still, Locke’s argument does have the general cosmological structure of observing some fact about the world and then inferring that this fact can only be explained by appeal to God’s existence. To understand Locke’s reasons for beginning with his own mind, rather than the external world, see Bodleian Ms. Locke c. 28, fol. 120v, reprinted at Nuovo, ‘Epicureans’, 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Note that this seems to allow that a power had by a created thing can be either actually or eminently contained in its creator. A created power is said to be *actually* contained in a creator when that created power resembles or corresponds directly to a power had by the creator. In contrast, a created power is said to be *eminently* contained in a creator when that created power does not resemble or correspond directly to a power had by the creator but instead the creator’s greatness guarantees the ability to create that power. One consequence of this is that an infinitely great creator (such as God) will be able to give any power to a creature whether or not it resembles or corresponds to a power had by that creator. If this is correct, however, it point to another difficulty with Locke’s argument. As will be discussed below, Locke uses Containment to infer that God actually contains the power of thought and is a thinking thing. But it is unclear whether he is entitled to this. Given his principles, it might only be the case that God eminently contains the power of thought. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Locke’s reasoning here is notoriously problematic. He is only entitled to infer that there has always been at least one thinking being in existence. He is not entitled to infer, as he seems to do, that some one specific thinking being has always been in existence. Leibniz notes this in his *New Essays*. See G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* [*New Essays*], P. Remnant and J. Bennett (eds.) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), at 436. More intriguing is the fact that Henry Lee makes this point in a book he published while Locke was still alive. See H. Lee, *Anti-Skepticism* [*Anti-Skepticism*] (London, 1702), 281-2. Locke was aware of Lee’s work but seems to have had a low opinion of it and may not have read it. See Locke to Collins, 24 March 1704. *Corr* 8: 255. Given that I am arguing that Locke crafted *E* IV.x very carefully, it may seem odd that the chapter could contain such a philosophical blunder. One possibility is that a work can be carefully crafted yet not entirely thorough. At both *E* IV.x.6 and *E* IV.x.12 Locke suggests that once a reader appreciates his argumentative framework it will be possible to easily demonstrate the rest of God’s attributes. Perhaps he imagined that divine simplicity or unity would be among those attributes but elided the demonstrations. For some interesting discussion and citations to parts of Locke’s correspondence that address this issue see W. Klever, ‘Hudde’s Question on God’s Uniqueness: A Reconstruction on the Basis of van Limborch’s Correspondence with John Locke’, *Studia Spinozana*,5 (1989), 327-57. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Note here that Locke does not mention our *bodies* as purely material but instead invokes separated body parts. This is important insofar as it leaves open the possibility that our bodies are thinking beings. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. That being said, two of Locke’s early critics did seize on the importance of this passage. Shortly after Locke’s death William Carroll published a book that offered a line-by-line analysis of *E* IV.x. He argues that this distinction is essential for understanding the chapter. See Carroll, *Dissertation*, 135-137, 168-169, and 172ff. John Sergeant, in his 1697 *Solid Philosophy Asserted*, also saw problems with disturbing the traditional categories of ‘spiritual’ and ‘corporeal.’ He worried that Locke’s distinction allows for thinking matter and therefore endangers the immortality of the soul. The marginal notes Locke made in his copy of Sergeant’s book do nothing to assuage this worry; he specifically pushes back against Sergeant’s suggestion that a thinking material being would contain a contradiction. See J. Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy Asserted, Against the Fancies of the Ideists* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 389-96. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I have substituted ‘Cogitation’ for De Beer’s ‘Thought’ as a better fit for *‘cogitatio*.’ The original Latin reads as follows: ‘Quia si agnoscerem Dominum H esse Cartesianum ideo terminus *Incoporeus* vel *immaterialis* non esset ex definitione dei omittendus Quoniam quicunque de deo recte cogitare velit debet ab ipso amovere materiam omnen sive Corporietatem. Quod sane *cogitatio* non facit quicquid in contrarium sentiant viri Cartesii placitis addicti.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See the discussion in note 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Note the similar production language in the passage cited above from *E* IV.x.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. It may be noted here that Locke does differentiate between four different senses of ‘causation’ at *E* II.xxvi.2 (creation, generation, making, and alteration). That said, I have not found these distinctions helpful for interpreting *E* IV.x and Locke does not seem to employ them for philosophical purposes anywhere else in the *Essay*. More clarity might instead be gained by mapping onto the Aristotelian causal schema. Within this fourfold classification of causes, production1 will correspond most closely to material causation whereas production2 will be more like efficient causation. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The emphasis on the cosmological argument here should also remind us that matter is being asked to explain not just thought but rather thinking beings like us. In this section Locke does sometimes speak about ‘matter producing thought’ but the context indicates that in these cases he is using ‘thought’ metonymously to refer to a being that displays organized, complex thought. His more considered phrasings in the section are ‘a thinking intelligent being’ and ‘sense, perception, and knowledge.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Arguably this is closer to the sense of the Latin *facere*: to be made, to become, to take place. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. 2.12.1 suggests that we are incapable of producing anything *ex nihilo*. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. There is the issue of whether parents can be said to produce2 their children. The epigraph of the *Essay* from Ecclesiastes 9 gives us some indication of Locke’s views on the matter: ‘As thou knowest not what is the way of the Spirit, *nor how the bones do grow in the Womb of her that is with Child*: even so thou knowest not the works of God, *who maketh all things*’ (*E* title page, emphasis added). The *First Treatise on Government* makes it clear that Locke took this Biblical view seriously and that God has ultimate responsibility for the creative act in reproduction. See *First Treatise*, Ch. 6, §§52-53. *Works* 5: 251-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. M. Rozemond, ‘Mills Can’t Think: Leibniz’s Approach to the Mind-Body Problem’, *Res Philosophica*, 91 (2014), 1-28, at 2 for example, explicitly identifies Leibniz’s argument with Locke’s. The reconstruction of Locke’s claims in this section will suggest that, in fact, the two arguments differ greatly. That said, Locke’s remarks may have provided Leibniz with the original inspiration for his Mill Argument. An early formulation of Leibniz’s argument, one which predates the famous version from the *Monadology* §17, appears in his *New Essays*. See G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, R. Ariew and D. Garber (eds.) (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), 215 and Leibniz, *New Essays*, 66-7, see also 440 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See also his comments to Stillingfleet at *Works* 4: 465. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This work has traditionally been ascribed to Thomas Burnett. But see C. Walmsley, H. Craig, and J. Burrows, ‘The Authorship of the *Remarks upon an Essay concerning Humane Understanding*’, *Eighteenth Century Thought*, 6 (2016), 205-43 for compelling evidence that the work was more likely penned by Richard Willis. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For more details regarding Locke’s reading of these pamphlets and transcriptions of his marginal notes see N. Porter, ‘Marginalia Locke-a-na’, *New Englander and Yale Review*, new series 11 (1887), 33-49 and *RR*. For a discussion of all the issues relevant to the controversy see S.A. Grave, *Locke and Burnet* (Perth: Department of Philosophy, University of Western Australia, 1981). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. In the elided part of Locke’s reply he again mentions human short-sightedness in a passage that looks very similar to the one quoted above from *E* II.xxiii.8. For Locke’s other uses of this strategy see *RR* 78, 79, 82, 84, 85, and 86. For more texts and some discussion see J.-P. Schachter, ‘Locke and the Achilles Argument’, in T.M. Lennon and R.J. Stainton (eds.), *The Achilles of Rationalist Psychology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 115-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Locke does discuss here whether sense, perception, and knowledge are ‘a property eternally inseparable from Matter and every Particle of it’ (*E* IV.x.10: 624). One might try to draw an argument from this. The worry, however, is that Locke almost immediately turns his attention to views that allow matter thinks but deny that thought is eternally inseparable from it. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Voltaire was one early commentator who, in his 1734 *Letters on the English*, correctly seized on this aspect of Locke’s treatment of thinking matter. See Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 55-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. One could push back on this point by pressing the Humean view that it is also not obvious that there is a contradiction in the idea of a system of matter *generating* a thinking thing. My suspicion is that we could resolve this through an appeal to Containment, which Locke endorses and Hume rejects. Matter producing1 thought would not be a violation of Containment, whereas matter producing2 thought would. And Locke may have believed that violations of Containment contain a contradiction. The contradiction, as Locke so often stresses, is akin to the one in something coming from nothing. As Locke tells Stillingfleet: ‘“every thing that has a beginning must have a cause,” is a true principle of reason, or a proposition certainly true…’ *Works* 4: 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Possible evidence for this line of thought comes from Locke assertion to Stillingfleet that his proof (including the claim that God must be immaterial) is only *partly* contained in this section of *E* IV.x.10. See *Works* 4: 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. At no point in *E* IV.x (or, to my knowledge, anywhere else in his corpus) does Locke adopt the strategy of ridicule when discussing thinking matter. This sets Locke apart from many of his contemporaries who did see ridicule as the appropriate response to the suggestion of thinking matter. See, for example, S. Parker, *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature* (London, 1681), xxiii-iv or R. Bentley, *Matter and Motion Cannot Think* (London: 1692), 19-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. This phrase allows us to consider the view as an abstract philosophical one. But, of course, Locke may have had specific targets in mind. Nuovo, ‘Epicureans’ offers evidence that Locke had Epicureanism on his mind when constructing the chapter and mentions Hobbes and Stoic theology as other possible targets. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For this point see H.-K. Kim, ‘A System of Matter Fitly Disposed: Locke’s Thinking Matter Revisited’, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 90 (2016), 125-45, at 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. A similar point would apply to the final sentence of *E* IV.x.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Locke resolved to make some changes in order to remove the appearance of a contradiction. Strikingly, his efforts did not result in a clarification of the nature of superaddition or further claims about the inability of matter to think. Rather, in 4.3.6 he specifies that he is considering the possibility of a ‘system of matter’ being made to think. The first edition had merely discussed ‘matter’ coming to be a thinking thing. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Lee, *Anti-Skepticism*, 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. For some discussion of this view and its role in the development of *E* IV.x see Nuovo, ‘Epicureans’. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. There is another powerful argument in the neighborhood that Locke does not present, but that he would have done well to put forward. The arguments earlier in the chapter are meant to prove the existence of an *eternal* thinking thing. The suggestion Locke rejects is that particles in random motion could be that eternal thinking thing. If one grants that matter can think, then the idea that particles of matter moving randomly about could eventually give rise to thought is not particularly troubling for familiar monkey-infinite-time-typewriter-Shakespeare reasons. What *does* seem implausible is that a thinking being produced by random motion would have been in existence forever and would continue to stay in existence forever. This would be akin to the monkey *only ever* typing out lines from Shakespeare and never typing out gibberish. Put differently, those positing an eternal thinking being that is the result of random motions of matter bear two explanatory burdens. First, they must explain why such a being would have organized thoughts. This is the point Locke pushes. Second, they must explain what accounts for the continued unity and persistence of such a system. This is the point Locke could have pushed. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. For a discussion of relevant secondary literature and a further defense of this ‘agnostic’ approach to superaddition see P.J. Connolly, ‘Lockean Superaddition and Lockean Humility’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 51 (2015), 53-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. I would like to thank Annemarie Butler, Nick Jolley, Alan Nelson, Matt Priselac, Sam Rickless, Don Rutherford, Elanor Taylor, and Tim Yenter for discussing this paper with me and offering countless helpful suggestions and recommendations. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the University of Mississippi, the University of California at Irvine, and at the 2013 Eastern APA, where I received very helpful comments from Eric Stencil. I’m grateful to the audience on each occasion. Finally, I am deeply indebted to two anonymous referees who carefully considered the paper and offered questions and suggestions that improved it a great deal. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)