

JOHN LOCKE

Edited by
Peter Anstey

CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS OF
LEADING PHILOSOPHERS, SERIES II

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INTRODUCTION

Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* is primarily concerned with the nature, scope and origins of our knowledge and belief, however, it also contains many celebrated passages that pertain to metaphysics. In fact, many of its central epistemological doctrines are inextricably bound with metaphysical ones. So, for example, in his discussion of our ideas of the qualities of bodies in Book II chapter viii, Locke develops his doctrine of primary and secondary qualities in a manner which implies a commitment to a corpuscular theory of matter. Or again, in Book IV chapter iii when Locke is elaborating on the extent of our knowledge he uses the example of our ignorance of the nature of the mind and introduces the famous passage on thinking matter which has deep implications for his views on the ontological status of human minds. So prominent are the metaphysical passages in the *Essay* that within just a few months of its publication, one reader could praise it saying that it 'Explaines Metaphysical Notions, strip't of the Jargon and Gibbrish of the Cloister'.¹

It is not surprising therefore, that discussions of metaphysical issues arising out of Locke's *Essay* make up a significant component of the secondary literature on Locke. As with Locke's epistemology, there are a number of seemingly insoluble issues among the metaphysical passages in the *Essay*. One such issue concerns the nature of substance. The opening section of this volume contains two recent papers on Locke on substance. The second section contains five papers on different aspects of Locke's theory of qualities; the third section concerns Locke's views on the nature of mind; then follow sections on the nature of species (or in modern parlance natural kinds), on Locke and the mechanical philosophy and on identity and the self.

Substance

In the order of being, the natural place to start is with substance and in the first section of this volume the question of the interpretation of Locke's notoriously difficult discussions of 'substance in general' or 'substratum' is approached from two different perspectives. Jonathan Lowe presents his own interpretation of Locke on substance which he identifies with the object itself. Lowe then proceeds to critique the philosopher C. B. Martin's

account of Locke's view of substance. Martin holds that for Locke, a substance is what it is about an object that plays the role of bearing its properties. While Lowe disagrees with Martin's view, his discussion is not so much concerned with interpreting Locke correctly, as with what we can learn about the nature of substance from Martin's very interesting gloss on Locke.

By contrast Edwin McCann examines the criticisms of Locke's view of substance by four of Locke's contemporaries: Henry Lee, Edward Stillingfleet, John Sergeant and G. W. Leibniz. McCann has his own interpretative agenda in his survey of Locke's critics, because he believes that Locke held a 'no theory' theory of substance, that is, McCann argues that for Locke, the idea of substance has no explanatory role, and further, that this interpretation of Locke is confirmed by an analysis of Locke's responses to his critics.

The theory of qualities

The late seventeenth century saw significant developments in philosophical reflection on the nature of the properties of bodies. One motivation for this was the new approach to the study of physical properties by natural philosophers such as Robert Boyle. It has long been appreciated that Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities was adumbrated by Boyle and that an understanding of Locke's natural philosophical context sheds important light on his views.² However, Locke's account of properties needs also to be evaluated in the light of his wider philosophical project within the *Essay*, and it is here that some serious problems of interpretation have arisen. One such problem is the meaning of Locke's talk of God superadding properties like gravity and thought to bodies. On the one hand, Locke appears to be committed to the view that if we knew the real essence of things we would be able to determine their other properties by reasoning in a way analogous to the reasoning used in geometry. On the other hand, however, Locke's talk of God superadding qualities like gravity or thought seems to leave no room for the geometrical analogy, but rather implies a form of voluntarism.

In his chapter on this issue, Matthew Stuart argues that the attempt by Michael Ayers to give deflationary readings of the problematic passages in Locke on superaddition fails. Ayers' deflationary reading allows him to regard Locke as a pure mechanist. Stuart argues, however, that Locke was committed to a stronger form of voluntarism with respect to laws of nature than such archetypal mechanical philosophers as Descartes and Boyle and that this should pose no problems for our interpretation of Locke, because he was not a mechanical philosopher at all. (Lisa Downing's chapter in this volume also addresses the question of Locke's commitment to mechanism.)

INTRODUCTION

Rae Langton takes a different line on the question of Locke on superaddition. She argues that the way to understand Locke's comments is to examine his account of relations. According to Langton, if the sorts of qualities that are said to be superadded, qualities such as gravity and thought, are relations or relational properties, we need to address the question as to whether Locke thought that relations in general are reducible to their relata. If they are, then the view of Michael Ayers is correct. If they are not then a voluntarist reading of Locke is correct. On this issue Langton leans towards the position of the late Margaret Wilson whose seminal article 'Superadded properties: the limits of mechanism' first set up the terms of this debate.³

Arguably the hallmark of the Lockean theory of qualities is the primary and secondary quality distinction. In his chapter, Rob Wilson focuses on the more neglected side of the distinction, Locke's primary qualities. He offers a 'transductive' rather than a conceptual reading of Locke's claims about the defining characteristics of primary qualities. Wilson argues that Locke is committed to the inference that if a quality is universal at the observable level, then it is also present at the unobservable level. This inference was also widely endorsed by Newton and Boyle. Wilson also provides a detailed analysis of Locke's lists of the primary qualities, paying special attention to the qualities of solidity, texture and mobility. The interpretation of the demarcation criteria for Locke's distinction has remained a vexed issue with some scholars claiming that Locke is simply inconsistent in his exposition. Samuel C. Rickless comes to Locke's defence in his chapter on 'Locke on primary and secondary qualities'. First, he sets out what he takes to be the content of Locke's distinction with special reference to Locke's own use of the notion of a 'real quality', and second, he analyses Locke's arguments for the distinction. All this is with a view to arguing that the distinction is coherent and well supported.

James Hill's chapter on Locke's account of cohesion rounds off the section on Locke's theory of qualities. Hill argues that in the final analysis Locke concedes that the mechanical philosophy in principle cannot give a coherent account of cohesion. Hill surveys the leading mechanical accounts of cohesion in Locke's time as well as the development of Locke's views on the subject from the drafts and *Abrégé* of the *Essay* to the *Essay* itself.

Mind

Locke tells us in the Introduction to the *Essay* that it is not his intention to 'meddle with the Physical Consideration of the Mind' and that he will not 'trouble my self to examine, wherein its Essence consists' (*Essay* I. i. 2). And yet at a number of points in the work he makes comments that have important implications for the ontological status of the mind. Philippe Hamou, taking as his point of departure Locke's notorious comments

on thinking matter, examines the range of Locke's discussions of the mind in and beyond the *Essay*. He concludes, contrary to the view of many, that far from inclining to Cartesian dualism, Locke, after weighing all the evidence most likely inclined to a materialist view.

José Luis Bermúdez, in his chapter on 'Locke, metaphysical dualism and property dualism', also claims that Locke was not a Cartesian dualist, that is, Locke denied that bodies and minds are two fundamentally different types of substance. However, Bermúdez goes on to argue that Locke was a property dualist in so far as he believed that mental properties are a fundamentally different kind of property to physical properties.

Natural kinds

Book III of the *Essay* is very difficult. Ostensibly it is about language, but in order to develop his account of the relation between words and ideas, Locke introduces a metaphysical distinction between real and nominal essence. (For discussion of Locke's views on language see II, 36 and 37.) The interpretation of Locke's distinction and its relation to the process of classification of objects has been vigorously discussed over the last fifteen years. David Owen takes up the question of Locke's notion of real essence, and, following Michael Ayers, argues that for Locke, the real essence of a kind of object is to be relativised to the nominal essence, or cluster of sensible ideas, that we have of that kind. In his chapter on 'Locke and natural kinds' Hilary Kornblith argues that Locke actually explores three different and incompatible views of the nature of species and our knowledge of them in the *Essay*, but that the general tendency of his discussion tends towards a realist position. The third chapter in this section argues for a novel interpretation of Locke's view of the real essence of substances. P. Kyle Stanford suggests that for Locke the real essence of a substance (as distinct from the real essence of a mode) is the corpuscular microstructure of the substance together with the necessary relations arising from this which give rise to the properties from which we form the ideas that make up the nominal essence of the substance. He then goes on to explore Locke's views on the reference of terms in the light of what contemporary philosophers call the Causal Theory of Reference.⁴

Mechanism

The mechanical philosophy, as promoted by René Descartes and Robert Boyle, was one of the leading natural philosophies in the latter half of the seventeenth century. It has traditionally been characterised as a systematic explanation of all natural phenomena by analogy with the functioning of machines and as being committed to a sparse ontology in which all that there is in the material world is homogeneous matter (which possesses

shape, size, texture and perhaps impenetrability) and motion. However, recent research into the views of leading mechanical philosophers who were contemporary with Locke has revealed that the picture is actually far more complex. It has, therefore, become a *desideratum* of Locke scholarship to provide an account of the sources of influence, the process of development and the mature statement of Locke's views on natural philosophy in general, and of this revisionist account of the mechanical philosophy in particular. To this end, J. R. Milton in his chapter on 'Locke, medicine and the mechanical philosophy' examines evidence, particularly amongst Locke's manuscripts, of Locke's exposure to leading natural philosophers and medical practitioners from his early years at Oxford up until the publication of the *Essay* in 1690. J. C. Walmsley in his chapter, which has been specially revised for this edition, reviews the evidence for Locke's commitment to doctrines associated with the mechanical philosophy in the Drafts of Locke's *Essay*.⁵ Lisa Downing's chapter on 'The status of mechanism in Locke's *Essay*' examines the *Essay* itself for evidence of Locke's commitment to the mechanical philosophy, with a special focus on the corpuscular matter theory. (This issue is also discussed in Matthew Stuart's chapter in this volume.)

Identity and the self

Locke discusses personal identity in the chapter 'Of identity and diversity' which was added to the second and subsequent editions of the *Essay*. An enormous literature has grown up around Locke's criterion of continuity of consciousness and the famous criticisms of Locke made by Thomas Reid and others in the eighteenth century. However, the criterion of personal identity over time was not Locke's only concern in 'Of identity and diversity' and the two chapters in this section discuss some of Locke's wider concerns. So, while Raymond Martin's chapter does assess Locke's defence of his account of identity over time, its main concern is with Locke's account of the psychology of personhood or selfhood. Martin stresses the centrality of Locke's notion of appropriation of past and present experiences to the self, as well as Locke's views on what we now call developmental psychology. John Yolton, in his chapter on 'Locke's Man' examines Locke's notions of man, self, person and agent and argues that of these, it is man that is the central and most basic notion. Both of these chapters have important connections with Kiyoshi Shimokawa's chapter on Locke's concept of property (I, 9).

Notes

- 1 John Evelyn to Samuel Pepys, 26 February 1690, quoted from *Particular Friends. The Correspondence of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, New edn 2005, p. 215.

INTRODUCTION

- 2 For a detailed treatment of Boyle's theory of qualities see Peter R. Anstey, *The Philosophy of Robert Boyle*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 17–112.
- 3 Margaret D. Wilson, 'Superadded properties: the limits of mechanism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (2), 1979, pp. 143–150.
- 4 For a recent monograph on Locke on natural kinds and identity over time see Christopher Hughes Conn, *Locke on Essence and Identity*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004.
- 5 See also Lisa Downing, 'The uses of mechanism: corpuscularianism in Drafts A and B of Locke's Essay' in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Corpuscular Matter Theories*, eds C. Lüthy, J. E. Murdoch and W. R. Newman, Leiden: Brill, 2001, pp. 515–534.

Part 16

SUBSTANCE

LOCKE, MARTIN AND SUBSTANCE

E. J. Lowe

Source: *The Philosophical Quarterly* 50(201), 2000: 499–514.

Perhaps more than any other aspect of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, his treatment of the notion of *substance* in that work has generated criticism and disagreement, often of an acrimonious kind, since its very first appearance. Locke's polemical exchanges with Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, were amongst the earliest manifestations of this phenomenon, and remain perhaps the most instructive.¹ But even in recent times the debates have continued to rage. Two of our most eminent present-day Locke scholars, Jonathan Bennett and Michael Ayers, have been at odds with each other on the subject for a good many years, without any very clear resolution to their dispute.² Another eminent metaphysician and Locke scholar, C. B. Martin, has also made an important contribution to the modern debate,³ but rather surprisingly this seems to have had little impact in the world of Locke scholarship, even though it has made a significant impression upon analytical metaphysicians. One of my main purposes in this paper is to look in some detail at Martin's account of Locke on substance. As I hope will become evident, I find much to admire in his account, even though I am not fully in agreement with it. But I should emphasize from the outset that I am motivated more by an interest in the metaphysical problems which a reading of Locke's and Martin's writings on substance is apt to inspire than I am by any desire to contribute to the scholarly interpretation of Lockean texts. Where I do commit myself to a particular interpretation of certain contentious Lockean passages, as I am bound to do at times, I follow the lead of respected Locke scholars, but I make it no part of my present business to defend those scholars against their critics.

Before I can turn to examining Martin's account of Locke on substance, I need to say something about Locke himself, partly by way of scene-setting,

and partly in order to record my own verdict on what I take to be Locke's position. This discussion will occupy §I, while §II will be concerned with Martin's account of Locke's views on substance.

I

There are at least three different questions that we can raise concerning Locke's doctrine of substance, all equally important in their own ways. (1) What *was* Locke's doctrine? (2) Is his doctrine philosophically defensible? And (3) was Locke's doctrine consistent with other central features of his philosophy, in particular, his empiricist epistemology? All three questions are highly contentious. I shall offer my own answers to all of them. On my account, it will emerge that Locke was not completely successful in his aims, but that his doctrine of substance was not a complete failure either, and that it is possible to adjust it in ways which lead to a more acceptable position. Although the *Essay* itself, and especially II xxiii, 'Of the Complex Ideas of Substances', must of course constitute our primary source for Locke's considered view about substance, his published correspondence with Stillingfleet is also vitally important, above all the early parts of his first *Letter to the Bishop of Worcester*. For it is here that Locke explains and justifies his doctrine of substance in the light of some very astute contemporary criticism, and we can learn much from his response. Stillingfleet, of course, was disturbed by what he saw as the theological implications of Locke's views, especially for the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. But his principal philosophical challenge to Locke, I think, lies in his charge that Locke cannot satisfactorily account for our idea of substance on the basis of his empiricist epistemology, insisting as Locke does that all the materials of our thought and reasoning come from simple ideas of sense and reflection.⁴

Before we proceed further, I need to focus the subject of our discussion more sharply. Locke has many things to say about substance which I do not wish to examine in any detail here. My primary concern is his views about what he calls *substratum*, or *pure substance in general* – though I shall almost always use the former term (see II xxiii 1–2). (Some commentators consider it a mistake to conflate Locke's uses of the terms '*substratum*' and '*pure substance in general*', but I follow the lead of Jonathan Bennett, who speaks of 'this notion of pure substance in general, or "Lockean *substratum*" as it is often called'.⁵) Now Locke also talks about *particular* substances (or *individual substances*) and *sorts of substances*, and, of course, about our 'ideas' of these (see II xxiii 3–4). By a 'particular substance', Locke for the most part means pretty much what Aristotle meant in *Categories* by a 'primary substance' – that is, what we would now call a particular or individual concrete *thing* or *object*, such as a particular man or a particular tree or a particular rock. The general – or, more precisely, the *sortal* – terms 'man', 'tree' and 'rock' denote sorts or kinds of particular substances, which