LOCKE AND METAPHYSICAL DUALISM

José Luis Bermúdez

Metaphysical dualism is not a topic that receives much attention in Locke's Essay.[1] In one sense this is rather surprising, given that so many of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries were preoccupied with the case for and against Cartesian dualism. In another sense, however, the lack of discussion seems all too natural a consequence of his scepticism about the possibility of gaining knowledge of real essences. If we can know only nominal essences and never what really lies behind them (the "real internal, but generally in Substances unknown Constitution of Things, wheron their discoverable Qualities depend"[2]), then it seems pointless indulging in the sort of speculation required to come out either for or against Descartes' position. Nonetheless, just as Locke's official position on the unknowability of real essences did not prevent him from tentatively espousing the "corpuscularian Hypothesis" (IV, iii, 16), nor did it stop him from occasionally engaging with dualism.

There are commentators who hold that Locke not only engaged with dualism, but was in fact a dualist himself. Aaron is one. He describes Locke's views as ". . . the traditional ones, accepted by the Church and upheld by Cartesianism".[3] He explains:

> Following traditional ways of thinking Locke regards the mind as a substance, but a substance which is immaterial. He accepts the usual dualism, the 'two parts of nature', active immaterial substance and passive material substance. . . It is a fundamental point with him that the universe cannot be explained in terms either of matter alone or of mind alone.[4]

Roger Woolhouse is a more recent commentator of the same opinion:

> What Locke says about body and mind is said against the background of Descartes' dualism. Generally he accepts that, besides God, there are two distinct kinds of thing, material substance or body, and immaterial substance or mind or spirit.[5]

---

[1] References to Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding will be to the Nidditch edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). They will take the usual form, so that 'II, ii, 2' should be read as 'Part Two, Chapter Two, Section Two'.

[2] III, iii, 15.

[3] Richard I. Aaron, John Locke, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955, second edition) p.143. Aaron notes, of course, that Locke's views on the essence of the mind were far from Cartesian, given his denial of the Cartesian thesis that the mind is always thinking.

[4] Aaron, ibid, p.142.

[5] R. S. Woolhouse Locke (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983) p.180. In the remainder of this paper I will follow Woolhouse in bracketing God's status as an immaterial thinking substance. In referring to

Douglas Odegard, in a paper devoted to the question, is careful to distinguish Locke from Descartes and attributes to the former a strict dualist theory according to which ". . . a mind and a body are different entities and each is "had" by a man".[6] According to Odegard, Locke's distinctive twist to metaphysical dualism is to insist that the mind is literally located in space, despite being immaterial and unextended.

There are, broadly speaking, three main areas of Locke's philosophy in which questions of dualism arise. They are his theory of the nature of our complex ideas of substances, his theory of personal identity, and his theory of immortality and the Resurrection. In this paper I shall concentrate on the first. Most commentators are agreed that part of what makes Locke's discussion of personal identity and the theological problems of immortality refreshing and distinctive is his reformulation of the issues involved in such a way that the problems cease to be ones which will depend upon the truth or falsity of metaphysical dualism.[7] And even those commentators who are most in favour of the metaphysical dualist reading admit that his theological views and his theory of personal identity are not good places to look for textual support.[8] It is worth, however, briefly quoting a couple of familiar passages to illustrate this.

To begin with the question of immortality, Locke is emphatic that belief in personal immortality does not require a dualist separation of mind and body;

> All the great Ends of Morality and Religion, are well enough secured, without philosophical Proofs of the Soul's Immateriality; since it is evident, that he who made us at first begin to subsist here, sensible intelligent Beings, and for several years continued us in such a state, can and will restore us to the like state of Sensibility in another World, and make us capable there to receive the Retribution he has designed to Men, according to their doings in this life.[9]

This is not much of an argument, but it does state Locke's position pretty clearly. Quite apart from questioning Locke's faith here, however, one might wonder quite what it is that will be resurrected, if not an immaterial soul. Locke does not take the obvious alternative and claim that the body will be

---

dualism I will be referring to the doctrine that there are two distinct substances or types of substance, apart from God. On my usage, which I take to be the standard one, the view that there are, on the one hand, material substances, and, on the other, God as an immaterial thinking substance, will not come out as dualist.

6 Douglas Odegard, 'Locke and Mind-Body Dualism', Philosophy 45 (1970).

7 See, for example, Henry E. Allison, 'Locke's Theory of Personal Identity: A Re-examination', reprinted in I. C. Tipton (Ed.), Locke on Human Understanding (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977). John W. Yolton is a conspicuous example of a commentator who claims that this holds of Locke's philosophy as a whole. See, for example, the entries on 'substance' and 'thinking matter' in his A Locke Dictionary (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1993), where he credits Locke with taking the first steps in the removal of substance ontology from the philosophical arena that was to culminate in Hume's attack. I am fully in agreement with this.

8 Odegard, for example, concedes that ". . . his dualism is put under considerable pressure by what he says when he discusses personal identity' (op. cit., p.104 n.3)

9 IV, iii, 6.

resurrected, despite the long ancestry of the idea in Christian thought. On the contrary, he denies the resurrection of the body (and when called to task for this by Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, he denies that there are any references to the body being resurrected in the Bible).[10] It is here that his theory of personal identity comes into the picture, because it is the person who will be resurrected. Locke's analysis of personal identity involves a distinction between the man and the person, according to which the identity of persons is grounded in memory, or consciousness.[11] The details of the theory are well-known and there is no need to go into them here. What is worth stressing is the fact that Locke's psychological account of personal identity is neutral on the ontological questions that Descartes, for example, thought needed to be answered before a satisfactory account could be given. In particular, he claims that, even if dualism is correct and the possibility of thought requires the existence of an immaterial substance, the persistence of such an immaterial substance will be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for personal identity. It will not be sufficient because:

> . . . if the same consciousness (which, as has been shewn, is quite a different thing from the same numerical Figure or Motion in Body) can be transferr'd from one thinking substance to another, it will be possible, that two thinking Substances may make but one Person. For the same consciousness being preserv'd, whether in the same or different Substances, the personal Identity is preserved.[12]

And nor is it necessary, because it is perfectly possible for an immaterial substance to persist despite losing all its memories. In such a situation it would remain the same substance, but there could be no continuity of person.[13]

Neither the discussions of immortality or of personal identity are of much help to interpretations of Locke as a metaphysical dualist. A far more fruitful source, however, is Locke's theory of substance, particularly as it emerges in Essay II, xxiii, the chapter on complex ideas of substances, and in the correspondence with Stillingfleet. Both are frequently cited when Locke's putative dualism is discussed.[14] In this essay I shall concentrate particularly on the chapter from the Essay, although there will be occasion to appeal to the correspondence with Stillingfleet. I shall argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, there are neither good textual nor philosophical reasons for describing Locke as a metaphysical dualist. Locke does not explicitly advocate metaphysical dualism, and nor is he implicitly committed to it. It is a central tenet of his philosophy that debates about the truth or falsity of metaphysical dualism are in an important sense illegitimate. Despite this, however, he is a property dualist in a sense I shall explain.

---

[10] See the Second Reply to the Bishop of Worcester, in The Works of John Locke, 1823, Vol. IV pp.303-8.
[11] See II, xxvii, 6-26.
[12] II, xxvii, 13.
[13] II, xxvii, 14.

The first salient passage in the chapter on complex ideas of substance occurs just after the initial discussion of the idea of substance in general:

> . . . we must take notice that, our complex Ideas of Substances, besides all these simple Ideas they are made up of, have always the confused Idea of something to which they belong, and in which they subsist: and therefore when we speak of any sort of Substance, we say it is a thing having such or such Qualities, as Body is a thing that is extended, figured, and capable of Motion; a Spirit a thing capable of thinking. . . (II, xxiii, 3)

Far from maintaining a dualist position, what Locke seems to be drawing attention to here is the tenuous basis for contemporary references to thinking substance and material substance. The passage is diagnostic, explaining how the ideas of thinking and material substances arise from the 'obscure and relative Idea of substance in general' (II, xxiii, 3), as the begining of the section makes plain. Insofar as Locke can be seen to take a stance on dualism here at all, it seems to be critical rather than supportive, precisely because he seems to be so suspicious of the terms with which the dualist position is formulated. If the idea of substance in general is dubious, then so too must be any ideas derived from it.

Other passages in the chapter are more ambiguous, however. In both II, xxiii, 5 and II, xxiii, 32 Locke draws a parallel between our ideas of material substance and thinking substance, suggesting that whatever legitimacy our idea of material substance possesses also applies to our idea of thinking substance. Consider II, xxiii, 5:

> The same happens concerning the Operations of the Mind, viz. Thinking, Reasoning, Fearing, etc. which we concluding not to subsist of themselves, nor apprehending how they can belong to Body, or be produced by it, we are apt to think these the Actions of some other Substance, which we call Spirit;

Locke's point is that we have an idea of thinking substance, or spirit, because we have no idea how 'the Operations of the Mind' can be produced by the body. The idea of thinking substance is, he seems to be claiming, partly based on our difficulty in imagining how there could not be such a thing. As II, xxiii, 5 continues, however, he leaves this point behind and presses the parallel between the ideas of thinking and material substance:

> . . . We have as clear a Notion of the Substance of Spirit, as we have of Body; the one being supposed to be (without knowing what it is) the Substratum to those simple Ideas we have from without; and the other supposed to be (with a like ignorance of what it is) to be the Substratum to those Operations, which we experiment in ourselves within.

---

14 Woolhouse, for example, adduces II, xxiii, 3, 5, 32 in support of his claim that Locke is a dualist, while Odegard leans on II, xxiii, 15, 18-20, 22, 28.

Both our idea of material substance and our idea of thinking substance result from applying the dubious notion of substance in general. In which case, he claims, it is impossible to see either one as more or less legitimate than the other. One would, as he goes on to say, be no more justified in concluding that Spirit does not exist just because we have no clear idea of thinking substance, than we would be in claiming that Body does not exist on the grounds that we have no clear idea of material substance.

Is this an argument for metaphysical dualism? The truth of dualism does not immediately follow from the fact that our ideas of thinking and material substance are equally legitimate, but if our ideas of the two different types of substance are equally legitimate, then once we have posited and accepted the existence of Body, we seem committed to accepting the existence of Spirit. This still falls short of asserting the truth of dualism, but it does seem to be claiming that it would be irrational to accept that material substance exists while at the same time denying the existence of thinking substance. Given, therefore, the extreme paradoxicality of denying the existence of material substance, then, as Michael Ayers remarks, it might seem to follow that Locke is offering us dualism as the only rational position.[15] Even more than Ayers, I think we should be wary of accepting this, but some scene-setting is required before it can properly be criticised.

When Locke talks about thinking substance, he often glosses over a fundamental distinction in seventeenth century theories of substance - the distinction between substance and principal attribute. In Descartes' Principles of Philosophy, for example, a careful distinction is made between a particular substance and the "one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which its other properties are referred" (Pt 1 §53).[16] In the case of corporeal substance, for example, the principal attribute is extension, while it is thought in the case of intelligent substance. Cartesian dualism, then, operates at two different levels - the level of attributes and the level of substance. There are two distinct principal attributes, namely thought and extension, and two distinct substances, intelligent substance and corporeal substance. The crucial difference between intelligent substance and corporeal substance is that the former is immaterial while the latter is material. It is, moreover, this difference between corporeal substance which is essentially extended and immaterial substance which is essentially thinking that makes Descartes a metaphysical dualist. A comparison with Spinoza will clarify the point. In Book 1 of the Ethics Spinoza develops a theory which is (at least) dualist at the level of attribute and monist at the level of substance.[17] Spinoza's one substance has (at least) two

---

[15] Michael Ayers, Locke Volume 2 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991) p.44. It should be noted that Ayers does not think that Locke is a dualist. Three pages later he states: "Mind-body dualism. . . was for him dispensable in toto. There may be dualist lapses, but he was in general prepared to frame his argument in carefully and provocatively neutral terms whenever (as in the proof of God's existence or the treatment of personal identity) the issue had appeared to others to hinge on the question whether what thinks in us is material or immaterial". But he certainly does think that II, xxiii is a good place to look for Locke's lapses into dualism.

[16] The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,Vol. 1 translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p.210.

[17] The 'at least' is a reference to Spinoza's notorious doctrine that God has infinite attributes (Ethics Pt 1, prop. 11). It is not clear whether Spinoza means there to be infinitely many attributes, or whether

attributes. As a consequence Spinoza fails to be a metaphysical dualist, although he comes out as what Bennett terms a property dualist - someone who holds that "the properties of things can be cleanly split into two groups, mental and physical, with no property belonging at once to both groups; this being so understood as to rule out any defining of mental terms through physical ones".[18] The metaphysical dualist is operating at the level of substance while the property dualist is operating at the level of attribute.

This contrast between substance dualism and property dualism is important and worth sharpening further. Bennett distinguishes Spinoza's property dualism from the much stronger metaphysical dualism held by Descartes which ". . . adds to property dualism the thesis that no one thing can have properties of both kinds".[19] The metaphysical dualist is committed to the view that the two fundamentally different kinds of property can only be had by two fundamentally different types of thing, and so is led to postulate the existence of two distinct substances - material substance which can have only physical properties, and immaterial substance which can have only mental properties. What characterises the property dualist is an insistence on the impossibility of explaining mental properties in terms of physical properties (or physical ones in terms of mental ones), but it is open to him to think that one thing can have properties from both attributes, and indeed that all the things in the world that have properties are of the same fundamental kind.

There are obviously a range of different reasons for moving towards property dualism. In the case of Spinoza he was offering property dualism as a solution to the well-known problems of Cartesian interactionism. Spinoza's property dualism was accompanied by the thesis that there could be no causal interaction between modes of different attributes.[20] This is a thesis that Locke, of course, did not share. He was quite happy with the commonsense view that mental states could cause behaviour, and of course it is a crucial part of his doctrine of primary and secondary qualities that the action of corpuscles could bring about ideas in us. But one can certainly be a property dualist without denying interactionism. One might feel that, although there can be causal action between modes of different attributes, it is nonetheless impossible wholly to explain properties which fall under one attribute in terms of properties which fall under another - and, more generally, to explain the very existence of one attribute in terms of another. So, for example, one might be prepared to accept that it is the motion of corpuscles that causes the idea of redness, but refuse to accept that the idea of redness can be explained in terms of physical properties. Put in most general terms this sort of motivation for property dualism is one of resistance to reductionist explanation. Locke, I shall argue, was a property dualist for precisely this reason, but quite some work will be required to show this.

---

he is pointing out that, whatever attributes there are, they are infinite. In any case, in the Ethics, he only discusses the two attributes of thought and extension.

[18] Bennett, Jonathan, A Study of Spinoza's Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp.41.

[19] Bennett, ibid. p.41. What I term 'metaphysical dualism' Bennett calls 'substance dualism'.

[20] See, for example, Ethics Pt 1, prop. 10 and Pt 2, prop. 6.

We can make a beginning by going back to II, xxiii, 5, where he explains how our idea of thinking substance emerges. We have, he starts by pointing out, ideas of various 'Operations of the Mind'. He then notes that these are ideas of accidents, rather than of substances, and so they must inhere in a substance rather than 'subsist of themselves'. We posit a substance which we call Spirit, because we cannot 'apprehend' how those operations of the mind can be either accidents of Body, or produced by accidents of Body. The idea of immaterial thinking substance emerges because we need to appeal to some sort of substance and material substance is not a suitable candidate.

But why is material substance not a suitable candidate? One might be tempted here to appeal to a famous passage from Locke's proof of the existence of God:

> 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. . . Matter, incogitative Matter and Motion, whatever changes it might produce of Figure and Bulk, could never produce Thought. . . (IV, x, 10)

If this passage is read as saying that the idea of thinking material substance is a contradiction in terms, then we have a clear reason for positing the existence of immaterial thinking substance, and a clear case for describing Locke as a metaphysical dualist. But the problem with this is that the passage does not say that the idea of thinking material substance is a contradiction in terms. What it says is that we cannot conceive how thought could arise from matter in motion, any more than we can conceive how inert matter could acquire motion, or how matter could arise ex nihilo. There are two important points to be noted here. The first is that all three scenarios are described as inconceivable, rather than impossible. The second is that Locke is explicitly restricting himself to explanations of how a 'thinking intelligent Being' might be produced. All he says is that the operations and interactions of material particles will never be sufficient to produce thought. This is perfectly compatible with God having so arranged things that a material substance might have the power of thought.

And indeed, this very possibility is one that Locke both discusses and endorses in IV, iii, 6 and in his Second Reply to Stillingfleet. It is a crucial tenet of Locke's that the power of motion can only be conferred by God during the process of creation, whether it is the motion pertaining to solid material substances, or the self-motion enjoyed by animals and thinking beings.[21] What he suggests in IV, iii, 6, and persists in maintaining even when challenged by Stillingfleet, is that something very similar holds for the power of thought, and that because of this God could have 'superadded' the power of thought to matter. In IV, iii, 6 Locke claims that we cannot decide between the two possible accounts of the relation between mind and body. The first possibility he considers is clearly materialist (". . . whether Omnipotency has not given to some Systems of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think. . ."). The second is equally clearly a form of metaphysical dualism (". . . or else joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial substance: . .'). But, he proclaims, there is no means of choosing between these two possible explanations. Neither scenario is contradictory and, although

---

[21] IV, x, 10.

he concedes to the metaphysical dualist that his account is slightly less implausible than the materialist account, he does state that there is not much in it. The following passage is very revealing:

> It Being, in respect of our Notions, not much more remote from our Comprehension to conceive, that GOD can, if he pleases, superadd to Matter a Faculty of Thinking, than that he should superadd to it another Substance, with a Faculty of Thinking; since we know not wherein Thinking consists, nor to what sort of Substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that Power, which cannot be in any created Being, but merely by the good pleasure and Bounty of the Creator. (IV, iii, 6)

The message here certainly seems to be that, as far as our limited epistemic abilities are concerned, the idea of thinking matter is more or less on a par with the idea of immaterial thinking substance.

But one might ask whether what is at stake is just a matter of our limited epistemic abilities. Is the possibility of thinking matter just a function of the fact that we do not know enough to rule it out, or are we being offered something more substantial? Much of what Locke says seems to support the restricted reading, simply because so much of his terminology is epistemic. He speaks, for example, of ". . . it being impossible, by the contemplation of our own Ideas, without revalation, to discover, whether Omnipotency has not given to some Systems of matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think. . .".[22] The problem with putting the matter like this is that thinking matter might cease to be a possibility if our epistemic abilities become less limited. Perhaps, when we come to know more about the nature of thought, it will become clear that there really is a contradiction in the idea of thinking matter, which only our ignorance has up to now prevented us from seeing.

If this is what Locke is saying, then it is certainly too weak to warrant ascribing to him anything like a notion of property dualism. The crucial tenet of property dualism is that in principle we will not be able to explain mental properties in terms of physical properties, or vice versa, and so it has to rest upon something stronger than a contingent fact about the current limitations of our cognitive powers. But then the question arises of whether Locke can make any such principled claims, given the stress he places upon our ignorance of the nature of thought. It would, after all, be reasonable to argue that only once we possess a suitable knowledge of the nature of thought will we be able to substantiate any claims about how thought might be explained. In which case, Locke should have made more modest claims. Instead of saying that the notion of thinking matter is a coherent possibility, for example, he should have said that we are not at present in a position to rule it out. Certainly Locke thinks that he has grounds for claiming more than this. He states that the power of thought is such that it can only be bestowed by God. We might not know 'wherein Thinking consists', but Locke thinks that he knows at least one thing about it, which is that it could not have come into the world unless God put it there. Has he got himself into a mess here, or can he make this into a consistent position?

---

[22] IV, iii, 6.

A clear understanding of what is going on here will bring out Locke's property dualism, but to see why we need to go back to his proof of the existence of God in IV, x, 10, where he presents the following important argument:

> If we suppose bare Matter, without Motion, eternal; Motion can never begin to be: If we suppose only Matter and Motion first, or eternal; Thought can never begin to be. For it is impossible to conceive that Matter either with or without Motion could have originally in and from itself Sense, Perception, and Knowledge, as is evident from hence, that then Sense, Perception and Knowledge must be a property eternally inseparable from Matter and every Particle of it. . . And that therefore if Matter were the eternal first cogitative Being, there would be not one eternal finite cogitative Being, but an infinite number of eternal finite cogitative Beings, independent one of another, of limited force and distinct thoughts, which could never produce that order, harmony, and beauty which is to be found in Nature.

What Locke is offering here is support for his claim that the power of thought can only be bestowed by God. If the power of thought were not such that it could only be bestowed by God, it would have to be possible for it to arise from matter in motion (leaving aside for the moment the fact that matter can only acquire motion through divine intervention). But, Locke claims, if the power of thought could arise from matter in motion, then thought would be inseparable from matter. This step in the argument is underwritten by Locke's conviction that there is a necessary connection between real essences and their powers. If the power of thought were part of the real nature of material substance, then all material substance would have the power of thought, just as all triangles have three sides and angles that add up to 180 degrees. This Locke takes to be a reductio ad absurdum of the suggestion that thought might arise from matter in motion.

Now, there are two points to be made about this argument. The first is that it is perfectly compatible with Locke's insistence that we do not know the nature of thought. All it relies upon is a set of hypothetical claims grounded upon a particular theory of real essences. These hypothetical claims give rise to what Locke takes to be empirically decidable predictions. If thought could arise from matter in motion, then there would be infinitely many eternal thinking beings, and we can establish that this is not the case. Even if the commonsense claim that we do not experience a world containing infinitely many thinking beings is rejected, Locke can still fall back on the teleological point that such a world would not have the observable order and harmony of this one. None of this depends upon knowledge of the real nature of thought.

The second, crucial point is that this just is an argument in support of property dualism, because what Locke is providing is (what he takes to be) a good argument for denying that the power of thought can be produced by matter in motion. If the power of thought cannot be produced by matter in motion, then the presence of thought can only be due to divine agency. If the only way of explaining how mental properties could have come to be is through appeal to God, then it is clearly impossible to explain mental properties in terms of physical properties, because any such explanation

will have to make reference to God. The crucial point here is the interdependence between, on the one hand, the possibility of thought arising from matter in motion, and on the other the possibility of thought being explained in terms of matter in motion. Only if thought could arise from matter in motion would we be able to explain mental properties in terms of physical properties, and since we know that thought cannot so arise we also know that no such explanation can be forthcoming.

It is absolutely vital, if one is to get Locke straight here, to keep a firm hold on the distinction between, on the one hand, the position that there is no substance but material substance, and, on the other, the position that every identifiable power and action can be explained in terms of matter in motion. Hobbes is an example of a philosopher who espoused both positions. It is vital to his materialism both that there should exist nothing but body, and that all particular phenomena should be explicable in terms of motion. Descartes, of course, rejected both positions. What is distinctive about Locke is that although he neither espoused nor rejected the first position, he maintained the second position, with a principled denial that the power of thought is explicable in terms of matter and motion. Locke accepts that it might well be the case that there is no substance but material substance, and he accepts also that if that is so then what thinks will have both physical and mental properties. But what he will not accept, however, is that the mental properties might just be physical properties in the way that, for example, Hobbes suggests when he combines the claim that sensations should be understood in terms of motion in the sensory organs with the claim that all thought is explicable in terms of sense and imagination. For Locke, although the same thing might have both mental and physical properties, it will have properties falling into two fundamentally different types, and without appealing to divine agency we will have no way of explaining how it can be a thing which thinks at all.

It should be noted that in interpreting Locke's comments on thinking matter as supporting property dualism in this way I am diverging from Ayers' recent commentary. Ayers takes a strongly epistemic reading of Locke's suggestion that God might have superadded thought to matter. As he reads it, Locke's point is simply that we are not currently in a position to rule such a possibility out:

> Locke's position, then, was not that we know the nature of matter so well as to know that it could only think by a standing quasi-miracle. On the contrary, he held that because we do not know the nature of matter or of thought, we do not know whether thought lies within the capacity of matter as 'fitly disposed' by God. The possibility of thinking matter lies open to us 'in respect of our Notions', but whether it is an ontological possibility is precisely what, according to Locke, we do not know.[23]

Ayers seems to assume that for Locke to make any claim stronger than this epistemic one would be to contravene his insistence that we do not know the nature of matter or thought. What the proof of God's existence brings out, however, is that Locke does think he has grounds for a stronger claim. The possibility of thinking matter is indeed open to us 'in respect of our Notions', but this is not just

---

[23] Ayers, op. cit. Vol. 2 p.148

because of our ignorance of the real nature of thought and matter (although that ignorance is real enough). The possibility is open to us because we know that thought could not arise from matter in motion. It has to be bestowed by God, and God is as capable of bestowing it upon material substance as He is upon immaterial substance. Nonetheless, rejecting this aspect of Ayers' interpretation is consistent with taking his anti-voluntaristic point that Locke is not appealing to a standing quasi-miracle, because whether God bestows the power of thought on material or immaterial substance He will do it in such a way that it flows from the nature of the substance, precisely because the nature of the substance is altered by the superaddition of thought.[24] A standing miracle would be no more required in the putative case of thinking matter, than it is in the actual case of matter in motion.

It is now time to focus this back onto the argument discussed earlier. It was suggested that an argument could be constructed from the thesis that our ideas of thinking and material substance are equally legitimate to the conclusion that dualism is the only rationally defensible position. But we are now in a position to see why this should be resisted. The operative idea was that the equal legitimacy thesis means that, if we accept the existence of material substance, it would be irrational to deny the existence of thinking substance. This, it was suggested, just seems to be dualism. What should now be apparent, however, is that the sort of dualism implicated here is property dualism rather than metaphysical dualism. When Locke talks about accepting the separate existences of material substance and thinking substance, he should be read as asserting the distinction between material properties and thinking properties. Consider again II, xxiii, 3 and 5 where Locke explains the composition of the complex ideas of thinking and material substance. These complex ideas are generated, he claims, when to the simple ideas of various mental and physical properties we add the confused idea of a substance or substratum in which they inhere. But Locke neither affirms or denies that it is the same idea of substance or substratum in both complex ideas. Presumably the idea of substance in general is just too 'relative and obscure' to be determinate here. It might be the case that, in reality, the substance which sustains the various properties of thought is immaterial, or, alternatively, it might not. The crucial point, however, is that the idea of thinking substance which Locke was employing is not the idea of an immaterial thinking substance. In fact, it is important to stress that it is not really the idea of a substance at all. It is the idea of an irreducible collection of properties, as is borne out by Locke's general account of ideas of distinct types of substance in II, xxiii, 6:

> Whatever therefore be the secret and abstract Nature of Substance in general, all the Ideas we have of particular distinct sorts of Substances, are nothing but several Combinations of simple Ideas, coexisting in such, though unknown, Cause of their Union, as makes the whole subsist of itself.

There is no suggestion here that the 'Cause of their Union' has to be different for each distinct type of substance. It all depends, presumably, on the 'secret and abstract Nature of Substance in general',

---

[24] Although it is not altered in such a way that it loses the properties it had before. This emerges particularly clearly from the long passage from the Second Reply to Stillingfleet which Ayers quotes

but none of the relevant ideas point one way or the other. II, xxiii, 30 provides a useful illustration of the point. Locke begins:

> The substance of Spirit is unknown to us; and so is the substance of Body, equally unknown to us.

He goes on then to illustrate what is known to us. In the case of Body it is the primary qualities of having solid parts and motion. In the case of Spirit he mentions the various qualities of thinking (doubting, intending, fearing etc.), as well as the power of willing and moving the body. Clearly, these complex ideas are compatible with either substance dualism or substance monism.

If this interpretation is right, then none of the passages we have examined commit Locke to metaphysical dualism. The most they commit him to is a form of property dualism, leaving open the more fundamental question of whether two distinct substances or types of substance underlie the two distinct sets of properties. And this is what we would expect given Locke's mitigated scepticism about real essences. To put the point in Kantian terms, he can be read as maintaining that we do not have knowledge of things-in-themselves, but of appearances which can ultimately be analysed into simple ideas.[25] Locke is a dualist in so far as he maintains that these simple ideas fall into two classes which cannot be defined or explained in terms of each other. But since he emphatically distinguishes substances themselves from our ideas of substances, he suspends judgement on what, if any, principle of connection there might be for the combinations of ideas that we encounter. It might be, as he postulates a propos the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, that we need appeal only to the operations of corpuscles to explain the connection between ideas, and that we can understand those corpuscles in terms of ideas which we already possess (those of primary qualities).[26] Alternatively, there might be something there completely beyond our ken. But since we do not know ". . . the very Essentia, or Being, of the thing itself, that Foundation from which all its properties flow, and to which they are all inseparably annexed", it would be illegitimate to move from property dualism to metaphysical dualism, or for that matter to materialism.[27]

It is, I think, neglect of Locke's agnosticism which has misled commentators into thinking that he is a metaphysical dualist. If one thinks that Locke was working within a conceptual framework within which the only available choices were metaphysical dualism, on the one hand, and materialism on the

---

on his p.173.

[25] A particularly clear statement of this occurs at III, vi, 9: "Our Faculties carry us no further towards the knowledge and distinction of Substances, than a collection of those sensible Ideas, which we observe in them; which however made with the greatest diligence and exactness, we are capable of, yet is more remote from the true internal Constitution, from which those Qualities flow, than, as I said, a Countryman's Idea is from the inward contrivance of that famous Clock at Strasbourg, whereof he only sees the outward Figure and Motions."

[26] I distance myself from interpretations of Locke which have him equating real essence with corpuscular substructure, as is done for example by Daniel Garber. See his 'Locke, Berkeley and Corpuscular Scepticism' in Colin M. Turbayne (Ed.), Berkeley: Critical and Interpretive Essays (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1982) pp. 175-8. I take seriously Locke's cautious references to the "corpuscularian Hypothesis".

other, then it might seem plausible to think of him as a dualist, because he is certainly not a materialist, despite his provocative comments about the possibility of superadding thought to matter. And there are passages in which Locke displays a definite temperamental attachment to the notion of immaterial substance. The following, from the correspondence with Stillingfleet, springs to mind:

> I grant I have not proved, nor upon my principles can it be proved. . . that there is an immaterial substance in us that thinks. Though I presume, from what I have said about the supposition of a system of matter thinking (which there demonstrates that God is immaterial) will prove it in the highest degree probable, that the thinking substance in us is immaterial.[28]

Locke might be a firm believer in the "corpuscularian Hypothesis", but this does not stand in the way of a sentimental attachment to immaterial substance (and there is no reason why it should, as is clear from the example of Descartes, who was as staunch a partisan of mechanical explanation, as he was of metaphysical dualism). But he still maintains that his theory of ideas is such that the existence of finite immaterial substance cannot be proven. It remains an article of faith, and Locke is quite prepared to withdraw that faith when rigour demands, as we have seen. The point is that Locke's mitigated scepticism allows him to avoid affirming metaphysical dualism, without ipso facto committing himself to materialism.

It is no objection to this reading of the chapter that Locke is at pains to stress that the idea of an immaterial thinking substance is not contradictory towards the end of the chapter (at II, xxiii, 31 and 32). He states, for example, that:

> I would fain have instanced any thing in our Notion of Spirit more perplexed, or nearer a Contradiction, than the very notion of Body includes in it; the divisibility in infinitum of any finite extension, involving us, whether we grant or deny it, in consequences impossible to be explicated, or made in our apprehensions consistent; Consequences that carry greater difficulty, and more apparent absurdity, than anything can follow from the Notion of an immaterial knowing substance. (II, xxiii, 31)

There are two reasons why this is perfectly compatible with the suggestion that Locke is a property dualist and not a metaphysical dualist. The first is that the non-contradictoriness of the notion of an immaterial knowing substance fits well with the agnosticism which I suggested is his considered attitude to ontological questions at the level of substance. As an agnostic there is no reason for him not to want to keep his options open. If we construe, as Ayers does, Locke's agnosticism as scepticism towards the opposition between dogmatic dualism and dogmatic materialism, then it is important to

---

27 The phrase quoted comes from the discussion of general terms in III, iii, 18.

28 The Works of John Locke 1823, Vol. IV p.33.

him that the alternatives are both live, so that he can play them off against each other.[29] The second reason is that Locke has very good reasons for not wanting the notion of an immaterial knowing substance to be contradictory, since he had to find a place for God in his system.[30] Admittedly, Locke does not seem to be discussing God explicitly, but rather the cogency or otherwise of the notion of a finite immaterial spirit. But since he believes that God exists, he must believe that there is no contradiction in the notion of an infinite knowing substance, and, given this, it would be bizarre if he were to find the notion of a finite immaterial substance contradictory.

There remains a significant difficulty that need to be cleared up, however, if the interpretation I have suggested is to be convincing. No mention has been made of II, xxiii, 15, a crucial passage which comes closer than any other to affirming a metaphysical dualism.[31] If my interpretation is to stand, then II, xxiii, 15 needs to be brought into line with it.

We need to look more closely at the relevant part of II, xxiii, 15:

> It is for want of reflection, that we are apt to think, that our Senses shew us nothing but material things. Every act of sensation, when duly considered, gives us an equal view of both parts of nature, the Corporeal and the Spiritual. For whilst I know, by seeing or hearing, *etc*. that there is some Corporeal Being without me, the Object of that sensation, I do more certainly know, that there is some Spiritual Being within me, that sees and hears. This I must be convinced cannot be the action of bare insensible matter; nor ever could be without an immaterial thinking Being.

At a first reading this passage seems to be suggesting something very similar to the classical Cartesian claim that introspection provides acquaintance with immaterial thinking substance. The claim seems to be that perceptual experience alone is sufficient for certainty that one is oneself an immaterial thinking substance. Indeed, the suggestion that nature has two parts, the Corporeal and the Spiritual, seems as straightforward an assertion of metaphysical dualism as one could ask for. It certainly seems to back up Aaron's reference in the passage quoted earlier to 'the two parts of nature'. Nonetheless, I think that this conclusion can and should be avoided.

There are two claims here which need to be explained. The first is the suggestion that I have certain knowledge that ". . . there is some Spiritual Being within me, that sees and hears", and the second the claim that this certainty, and indeed the possibility of perception in general, rests upon the existence of ". . . an immaterial thinking Being". We can make a start on the first one by recalling his

---

[29] It is, I think, in just this sort of dialectical strategy that Locke is engaged in the difficult passages in II, xxiii, 18-21 that lead Odegard to claim that he thinks that Spirit is a physically located immaterial substance.

[30] I think that this takes care of passages like the following from II, xxiii, 32: ". . . we have as much Reason to be satisfied with our Notion of immaterial Spirit, as with our Notion of Body; and the Existence of the one, as well as the other".

[31] Douglas Odegard takes this passage to settle the question in favour of a dualist interpretation of Locke ('Locke and Mind-Body Dualism', p.89).

comment to Stillingfleet that by 'Spirit' he means only whatever it is that thinks, ". . . without considering what other modifications it has, as whether it has the modification of solidity or no".[32] If this is indeed a reliable guide to his usage, then the fact that there is a 'Spiritual Being' within us does not entail that there is an immaterial substance. We could interpret Locke as reiterating his property dualism, and noting that introspection does not reveal physical properties, or indeed anything that might be produced by physical properties. On this view, the 'Spiritual Being' is a thing that thinks. But this still leaves the reference to 'immaterial thinking Being'. Here, it seems, Locke is unequivocally committing himself to the view that one's capacity for perception provides one with knowledge of the immaterial substance that one in fact is.

This too should be resisted, however, because it involves the mistaken idea that the "Spiritual Being within me, that sees and hears" is to be identified with the "immaterial thinking Being". Certainly, Locke thinks that both the Spiritual Being and the immaterial thinking Being exist. He also thinks that the very possibility of perceptual experience should be enough to convince one that they both exist. And he obviously thinks that the Spiritual Being is a thinking Being. But none of this commits him to thinking that the two are identical. And if we look more closely at the passage and compare it with the proof of God's existence which he offers in IV, x it should become much clearer how it can plausibly be read in a way that allows the Spiritual Being to be interpreted, as in the correspondence with Stillingfleet, as 'whatever it is that thinks'. The key to such a reading is the idea that the immaterial thinking Being is God, rather than the 'Spirit within'.[33]

Consider more carefully the way in which the 'immaterial thinking Being' is introduced. Locke begins by claiming that every instance of (veridical) perception affords knowledge both that there is something outside us which is perceived, and that there is something within us, a Spiritual Being which thinks. The Spiritual Being is what 'sees and hears'. Then comes the crucial sentence:

> This I must be convinced cannot be the action of bare insensible matter; nor ever could be without an immaterial thinking Being.

There are two separate ideas here which it is important not to run together. The first (which emerges from the first clause, before the semi-colon) is that seeing and hearing cannot be the action of bare insensible matter. This side of Locke's view has already been discussed, in the context of what I have termed his property dualism. Thought cannot arise from matter in motion, with the consequence that thought and matter are explanatorily distinct. As was noted earlier, this does not commit Locke to metaphysical dualism, because he thinks that both immaterial and material substance could in principle be capable of supporting thought, although, whether thinking substance is material or immaterial, it will only have the power of thought because that power is conferred upon it by God.

---

32 The Works of John Locke 1823, Vol. IV, p.33

33 Ayers offers such a reading, op. cit. p.45.

This brings us onto the second idea (emerging after the semi-colon). The claim here is a modal one. Something, it is being suggested, could not exist in the absence of an immaterial thinking Being - or alternatively, would be impossible without an immaterial thinking Being. But what? There are two candidates. The first arises if we take the clause to be commenting on the previous clause in the same sentence - that is, the possibility of seeing and hearing arising from the addition of thought to bare insensible matter. Interpreted in this way, Locke's suggestion would be the subjunctive conditional that, if seeing and hearing were the product of the addition of thought to bare insensible matter, this would only be so if an immaterial thinking Being existed. Here it certainly would be natural to think that the immaterial thinking Being is God, given Locke's conviction that only God can superadd thought to matter. Now, if this is the import of the passage, then it obviously it brings with it no commitment to metaphysical dualism. Quite the contrary. On such a reading Locke would be commenting on the possibility, completely alien to the spirit of metaphysical dualism, that matter could support thought.

The clause could be read another way, however. Here the scope of the modal claim would be much broader, and Locke would be interpreted as asserting that the very possibility of seeing and hearing themselves is contingent upon the existence of an immaterial thinking Being. This reading would, I suspect be truer to Locke's intentions, but it provides no more evidence of metaphysical dualism in Locke than the previous interpretation. It is here that adverting to Locke's proof of the existence of God in IV, x is helpful, because Locke there makes clear his belief that the possibility of any sort of conscious perceptual experience is dependent upon the beneficence of God. Locke's proof rests upon the claim that, since we know that we are intelligent and sensible beings, then we know with certainty that we were produced by an intelligent and sensible being, since our very existence is proof of the existence of an eternal Being, while our nature as thinking and intelligent beings should convince us that that eternal Being is itself thinking and intelligent:

> Thus from the Consideration of our selves, and what we infallibly find in our own Constitutions, our Reason leads us to the Knowledge of this certain and evident Truth, That there is an eternal, most powerful, and most knowing Being;[34]

It is possible and indeed plausible, then, to read the final clause in II, xxiii, 15 as making the point that Locke was to make later on in the Essay, that the knowledge we have of ourselves and of the world around us is proof enough of the existence of an immaterial thinking Being, which we might as well call God. And God, to repeat the point, is as capable of adding the power of thought to a material substane as he is to an immaterial substance.[35] So there is nothing here either for supporters of the metaphysical dualist interpretation of II, xxiii.

---

[34] IV, x, 6.

[35] Nonetheless, Locke is convinced that God is an immaterial substance, and he provides a rather ingenious argument in support of this in IV, x, 10.

By way of conclusion, then, I would like to draw attention to another interesting point which emerges from IV, x. This is the way that Locke there classifies the "two sorts of beings in the World, that Man knows or conceives" (IV, x, 9). They fall, he claims, into two categories:

> First, Such as are purely material, without Sense, Perception, or Thought, as the clippings of our Beards, and paring of our Nails.
>
> Secondly, Sensible, thinking, perceiving Beings, such as we find our selves to be, which if you please, we will hereafter call cogitative and incogitative Beings; which to our present purpose, if for nothing else, are, perhaps, better terms than material and immaterial.[36]

Here he explicitly repudiates metaphysical dualism, suggesting that the traditional categories of material and immaterial substance be replaced by a division of particular substances into those that are capable of thought and those that are not. When this division is coupled with his principle that incogitative substances cannot explain cogitative ones we have a straightforward statement of property dualism.

Far, then, from suggesting that Locke is a metaphysical dualist who believes in the existence of both material and immaterial substances, a close reading of II, xxiii supports the view that Locke is a property dualist who remains agnostic on the traditional questions of substance ontology. This is, of course, the position that one would expect, given his distinction between real and nominal essence and his view that real essences are unknowable. It is, moreover, amply supported by what Locke has to say about personal identity and personal immortality. I conclude, then, that there are no good reasons for describing Locke as a metaphysical dualist, and good reasons for denying that he was. But, as Locke himself was one of the first to realise, not being a metaphysical dualist does not commit one to materialism.

---

[36] IV, x, 9.