





TACK, and Letter to Ms. Mary Astell

Eva Skinner is a second year philosophy undergraduate student at the University of Queensland, Australia. They have been infatuated with philosophy and all of its related disciplines since they were introduced to the Socratic method by one of their school teachers at the age of eleven, and have been studying it ever since. They are keen to pursue studies in philosophy long into adulthood, in a range of universities across the globe, and aspire to one day write their own philosophical treatise on the role of empathy and compassion in demonstrating the distinction between human soul and body.



TACK, by Evan Skinner

*The wet tack of sweat on dead skin is a mongrel to the senses
 Age cannot explain empty eyes
 I ask; is a puppet without human hands deceased?
 What is it but a spiritual death
 To lose one's own motion
 A sickly cleaving from his master
 Still, he is now missing something
 I wonder
 How is it that all his parts remain
 And yet it is no longer there*

Author's note

Tack is piece of metaphysical poetry, touching on the incoherence of materialism in the eyes of human emotion. The work covers the loss of the soul in death, and is partially Cartesian in its rejection of materialism, comparing the body to automata, and positing the soul as it's "pilot." Ultimately, it posits that the soul is that which makes body itself distinct from its fellow automata (in the example of the puppet).

Though materialism may maintain some scientific coherence, human emotion cannot reconcile with this. There remains, despite our understanding of the function of the brain in the animation of the body, a disgust at the presence of a cadaver. Once a person, the deceased is fundamentally missing something, a metaphysical presence.

This work too touches on Mary Astell's rejection of materialism; the human inability to reconcile the capacity of thought to body. Within the corpse, all the original "pieces" remain, yet we cannot conceive of the capacity for thought (or that which is "missing") in this body without life. Once dead, these two functions become irreconcilable in the context of the deceased.

*To Ms. Mary Astell
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To the Philosopher Ms. Mary Astell,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to you on this occasion in regard to your philosophical engagements with fellow academic, Sir John Locke. In this case, your engagements with him on the subject of thinking matter.

While the existence of “thinking matter” remains difficult to indisputably affirm or deny, I believe the metaphysical concept of “thinking matter” to be, at minimum, coherent, inasmuch as it cannot be resolutely disproved. I have conducted thorough analyses of both your arguments as well as those by Sir Locke’s regarding the feasibility of “thinking matter,” and whilst I find many of your criticisms of his work convincing, I ultimately concede to Locke the difficulty of affirming or denying the possibility of “thinking matter” in its entirety.

I understand this topic to be of considerable relevance to your philosophical period, particularly given the writings of the French philosopher René Descartes, to whom both you and Sir Locke are indebted. Each of your works and arguments on the subject of “thinking matter” has been influenced by, or has responded to, the proposals of Cartesian dualism as well as those of materialists like Thomas Hobbes and mechanists like Spinoza.

I will begin with Locke’s arguments in favor of the potentiality for thinking matter, as given in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke summarizes his argument as follows. “We [. . .] possibly shall never be able to know, whether any material being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us [. . .] to discover whether Omnipotency has not given to some System of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined to matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial substance.”¹ It is essential to note

¹ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Mary Whiton Calkins (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), Book IV, Chapter III, Section 6.

with respect to Sir Locke's argument that he does not argue in complete favor of a materialist approach. His argument, instead, proposes the possibility of thinking matter, arguing that the concept of thinking matter is not entirely contradictory. Additionally, Sir Locke is an empiricist; he believes that one derives knowledge from experience accrued through sense perception.²

Locke begins his argument by discussing the origins of thought and matter. Note that, like Descartes, Locke is a property dualist inasmuch as he considers the properties of the material and the mental to be distinct.³ He proposes that in the case of the first, eternal being, i.e., God, "it must necessarily be a cogitative being."⁴ Matter, he argues, cannot produce a thinking, intelligent being, nor can it produce motion. Given that matter is dead and inactive, if we suppose the existence of matter "first and eternal," motion can never begin to be. A traditional materialist may refute that matter has been eternally in motion. Locke counters this; matter may be eternally in motion, however, in this case, it will still never produce anything other than motion.⁵ Essentially, if we suppose matter and motion as first and eternal, thought can never begin to be. Therefore, given the existence of thought, we may presume the first and eternal being to be cogitative.

Though we may consider Sir Locke a property dualist in the Cartesian sense, Locke is excluded from those philosophers which we would deem substance dualists. In this case, Locke argues that it is feasible for the first and eternal being to confer a thinking substance upon an extended substance. Thus, Locke gives his case for superaddition. As we may see, matter is a solid, extended substance. However, in the case of matter such as plants, and animals, God confers upon them additional substances, such as motion, life, and sense.⁶ In each of these instances, the essence of

² Jonathan Bennett, "Locke's Philosophy of Mind," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 99.

³ Bennett, "Locke's Philosophy of Mind," 98.

⁴ Locke, *Essay*, Book IV, Chapter X, Section 10.

⁵ John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 16.

⁶ Yolton, *Thinking Matter*, 18.

matter itself is not destroyed. That is: “the properties of a rose, a peach, or an elephant superadded to matter, change not the properties of matter; but matter is in these things matter still.”⁷ This, as such, is Locke’s principle of superaddition. Stemming from this, Locke queries why we reject the notion of the superaddition of thought to matter when we do not query the addition of motion or life. Locke invokes a general principle in this argument; the superaddition of substances or properties to matter does not destroy its essence insofar as matter remains a solid, extended substance. If the essence of matter was destroyed in the process of superaddition, plants and animals would cease to remain material.

I would like now to examine your response to Sir Locke’s argument, as given in your work, *The Christian Religion*. As I understand, your work seeks to refute Locke’s proposal for the potentiality for thinking matter entirely, as opposed to the dismissal of such a theory as less plausible than that of the distinctly immaterial mind or soul.

Whilst Locke himself—as we have established—was an empiricist, you refute him in this respect, evident in your proclamation: “Most Men are so Sensualiz’d, that they take nothing to be Real but what they can Hear and See.”⁸ Your solution, in this debate, is the rejection of empirical sensate knowledge in favor of the contemplation of abstract ideas, accepting as knowledge only what can be clearly and distinctly perceived.⁹ Though Locke himself rejected this notion in writing that “the greatest part of mankind have not leisure for learning and logic [. . .] [and] mysterious reasoning,”¹⁰ you provide a markedly clever refutation to his statement, deducing that any considerable gaps in the reasoning powers of the general populace were due to lack of suitable

⁷ John Locke, “Mr. Locke’s Reply to the Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to His Second Letter,” in *The Works of John Locke, in Ten Volumes* (London, UK: Bye and Law, 1801), 4: 460.

⁸ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Profess’d by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London, UK: R. Wilkin, 1705), 295.

⁹ Cynthia B. Bryson, “Mary Astell: Defender of the ‘Disembodied Mind,’” *Hypatia* 13, no. 4 (1998): 46.

¹⁰ John Locke, “The Reasonableness of Christianity,” in *The Works of John Locke, in Nine Volumes* (London: Rivington, 1824).

education.¹¹ Certainly, any soul (man or woman) will be weaker than one which has been instructed. Locke does concede to the value of abstract reflection in developing knowledge, particularly regarding the substances. However, contrary to yourself, he still proposed that reflection was impossible without sensate experience to reflect upon. From this, we reach your objections to Locke's concept of Superaddition. As you fitly propose, the concepts of thought and extension may be conceived of as entirely distinct from one another (they may be considered independently). As such, you propose that to be distinct from any one thing is to not be this thing.¹² Consequently, since thought and extension are disparate,¹³ to propose that a thinking substance is an extended substance is as ludicrous as the proposition that a triangle is a circle, that motion is a rest, or that a material is both solid and non-solid at once.

An objection to this may be found in Locke's discussion of the connection or repugnancy of ideas in relation to the body. According to Locke, our knowledge concerning corporeal substances will see little progress with any hypothesis until we can see ". . . what Qualities and Powers of Bodies have a necessary Connection or Repugnancy one with another."¹⁴ Thus, it is impossible to discern the necessity of certain qualities to the body given our limited empirical knowledge of this. However, you counter that we can know that a subject cannot possess inconsistent or repugnant qualities assuredly (e.g., that it cannot be both solid and non-solid).¹⁵

From this principle, you aptly consider Locke's Superaddition. Given there is no part of extended matter capable of thought, Superaddition of thought to matter, as you state, ". . . is neither more or less than the making an Arbitrary Union between Body and

¹¹ Bryson, "Marry Astell," 47.

¹² Kathleen M. Squadrito, "Mary Astell's Critique of Locke's View of Thinking Matter," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (1987): 436.

¹³ "'Tis' evident that a Thinking Being can't be Extended, and that an Extended Being does not, cannot think, any more than a Circle can have the Properties of a Triangle, or a Triangle those of a Circle." Astell, *The Chirstian Religion*, 250.

¹⁴ Locke, *Essay*, Book IV, Chapter III, Section 16.

¹⁵ Bryson, "Mary Astell," 50.

something that is not Body.”¹⁶ Even if God has conferred a thinking substance upon an extended substance, in this respect matter is still not thinking, but the mind or thinking substance united to it. As you deduce, all Locke can potentially demonstrate by the concept of Superaddition is that God can make another substance whose essential property is thought, and unite this substance to an extended body. Locke may counter this suggestion by arguing that matter utilizes the superadded thinking substance to think for itself (i.e., a neurophysical system by which matter may regulate the powers of thought), though I propose you may counter that this still requires an independent substance, and that thought is not an attribute of matter itself.

In your rebuttal, you also consider the Cartesian likeness principles, those which propose that a representation must in turn be like that which is represented, and a cause must be in some way like its effect.¹⁷ If, in fact, matter can think, thought must be either its essence or mode (simply, the thing itself or its manner of being). As it is ridiculous to presume thought may be the essence of body, we must assume it to be its mode.¹⁸ However, given modes’ immediate dependence on and inseparability from the “Thing Whose Modes they are,” it must then be proposed that God is an extended body, otherwise, “He cou’d not Think”.¹⁹ As we can be assured that God possesses the power of thought, despite being unextended (as far as we may know), we can be certain that thought is not a mode of the body, and thus, that matter is incapable of it.

Though your rebuttal here is clever, it neglects Locke’s earlier conception of the origins of matter and thought, in that it remains necessary for God to be solely cogitative. Thought is necessarily the first substance, but this does not consequently limit the capacities of subsequent beings in possessing both extension and thought.

¹⁶ Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 161.

¹⁷ Ruth Boeker, “Locke and His Early Critics and Defenders: Metaphysical and Epistemic Differences,” in *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 207–45.

¹⁸ Squadrito, “Astell’s Critique,” 438.

¹⁹ Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 251-2.

From this outset it remains uncertain, as Locke proposes, whether God may confer a thinking substance upon an extended one.

Further, Locke himself consistently writes as though he rejects the likeness principles, thus rejecting the necessity of thought as an essence or mode of the body.²⁰ Though your argument is strong, it does not definitively respond to Locke's proposal.

You additionally invoke Locke's own language against him, stating, "I will presume to affirm that it is impossible for a Solid Substance to have Qualities, Perfections, and Powers, which have no Natural or Visible Connection with Solidity and Extension; and since there is no Visible Connection between Matter and Thought, it is impossible for Matter, or any Parcels of Matter to Think."²¹ Following from this statement, as you affirm, matter cannot be "thinking," as thought and extension hold no similar properties or "Visible Connection." However, Locke does not argue that matter possesses the "powers" for thought, as expressed in his argument for the cogitative nature of God, only conceding the possibility that God may confer upon (or Superadd to) matter, a substance which may think (though you may still consider this superadded substance a "quality, perfection, or power"). Additionally, in your invocation of Locke's statement in his *Essay*, the assumed request for "Visible Connection" between thought and extension may be deemed empirical or materialist in nature, thus invalidating its application in this argument.

Though your refutations to Sir Locke's argument are clever, the uncertainty and ambiguity of his argument for the potential of thinking matter make it a difficult one to disprove in its entirety. We may make the concept of thinking matter appear metaphysically weak, but it is difficult to form any argument on the subject in a manner which is solely abstract without the invocation of empirical knowledge, as this formed the basis of Locke's argument.

Thus, I am conceding to the coherence of "thinking matter," not its existence. Locke's principle of superaddition does not need to be infallible (as you effectively demonstrate it is not), but possible, even

²⁰ Squadrito, "Astell's Critique," 438.

²¹ Astell, *The Christian Religion*, 259.

minutely so. Though we may introduce the possibility, or even greater likelihood of a dualist theory, if we cannot, in full confidence, confute Locke's proposal, his argument for the uncertainty of "thinking matter" is unerring. As such, I write to you—not to convince you of the existence of thinking matter—but to convince you of its metaphysical coherence, expressly in the context of Sir John Locke's arguments in favor of its uncertainty.

*With regards from your humble admirer and friend,
Anonymous*

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