CRÍTICA. Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía. Vol. 56, No. 168 (diciembre 2024): 77–80

DOI: 10.22201/iifs.18704905e.2024.1570

Stewart Duncan, *Materialism from Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022, 248pp., ISBN: 9780197613009

Materialism from Hobbes to Locke is Stewart Duncan's new book on the problem of thinking matter. It is distinctive within the literature by beginning with Hobbes and ending with Locke, since most works begin the discussion of materialism with Locke and his notorious suggestion that matter might think. Duncan thus offers a kind of pre-history for texts such as John Yolton's *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1983) and *Locke and French Materialism* (1991) or Ann Thomson's *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (2008).

Duncan's thesis is that seventeenth-century British philosophers were largely reacting to Hobbes's form of materialism. In the book he focuses on the reactions of four philosophers whose engagement with Hobbes was particularly serious and protracted: Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, Margaret Cavendish, and John Locke. Duncan devotes considerable attention to each, but especially to Locke, whose thought encompasses four out of the eight chapters of the book. Duncan sees the issue of materialism intersecting with topics not often thought to be connected with it—imagism, innatism, and the idea of God. This surprising orientation gives the book a notable flair.

Duncan begins with Hobbes's objections to Descartes's *Meditations*. (Hobbes authored the Third Set of Objections.) At every turn, Hobbes fundamentally disagrees with Descartes's philosophical vision. Duncan uses this to paint Hobbes as a very different kind of thinker. Whereas Descartes used the idea of God to prove God's existence, Hobbes claims that we have no idea of God within us. This is largely due to Hobbes's imagistic conception of ideas. Whereas Descartes held that humans had immaterial minds, Hobbes denies the existence of any immaterial mind. Hobbes's imagism is again an important part of the story, for we can only have images of corporeal things. Whereas Descartes famously held that mind and body are both substances, Hobbes denied that we have any idea of substance. This too, according to Duncan, rests on Hobbes's imagism in that we cannot have an image of the subject of change underlying accidents.

Chapter Two looks at Hobbes's positive account of materialism and how he proves it. Duncan convinced us that Hobbes's positive account was question-begging. He expressed his deep commitments

to materialism but never actually engaged dualists with his reasonings. One line Duncan emphasized was that Hobbes developed a materialistic account of humans and human nature in the opening chapters of the *Elements of Law*. Another is an "argument from nominalism", which implies that the only mental faculty is the imagination. Yet another (repeated in the *Leviathan*) is the thought that "immaterial substance" is a contradiction because "substance" signifies only body. Duncan also finds that Hobbes held God was a material being. This was a position that Hobbes transitioned into late in his career. He moved away from the claim that we have no idea of God (defended in the Third Objections, the *Elements*, and first edition of *Leviathan*) to the claim that God is a body in the 1668 Latin edition of *Leviathan*.

Chapter Three is devoted to More's and Cudworth's criticisms of Hobbes's materialism. More responded directly to Hobbes's claims that "immaterial substance" is contradictory and insignificant speech by emphasizing a different definition of immaterial substance. More defined spirit in terms of "penetrability" and "indiscerpibility" (indivisibility) and body in terms of "discerpibility" (divisibility) and "impenetrability". This opens space between types of substances and allows More to recognize spiritual and bodily substances without generating any contradiction. More also accepts reports about the reality of ghosts, pace Hobbes's attempts to characterize them as mental episodes, i.e., out of control phantasms. Cudworth takes issue with Hobbes's supposed atheism, which is coeval with his materialism and rooted in his claim that we have no idea of God. Cudworth is most concerned to emphasize, pace Hobbes, that we do in fact have an idea of God, namely the idea of "*a Perfect Conscious Understanding Being* (or Mind) *Existing of it self from Eternity, and the Cause of all other things*" (p. 59). Cudworth's evidence for this is that atheists have this idea, which they require to conceive that God does not exist, and people who speak different languages, and hence have different names for God, nonetheless all think about the same thing through this shared idea. In this chapter Duncan also considers More's acceptance of a "spirit of nature" and Cudworth's acceptance of "plastic natures" as further rebukes of Hobbes's materialistic worldview.

Chapter Four examines Cavendish's criticisms of Hobbes's materialism. Margaret Cavendish was herself a materialist and someone strongly influenced by Hobbes but who was no Hobbesian. Cavendish was a panpsychist who, according to Duncan, can be seen as occupying the conceptual space between Hobbes and More. Like More, she believed that nature required guidance by a mind but like Hobbes

she believed that this mind was material. Cavendish was also anti-mechanism, unlike Hobbes. Indeed, says Duncan, she challenges the idea that seventeenth-century materialists were all mechanists. Cavendish also is cagey about the possibility of supernatural immaterial substances. She admits that there are no immaterial substances in nature and seems even to accept Hobbes's thought that immaterial substance is inconceivable, but also accepts that supernatural substances are immaterial. How she reconciles these claims is not altogether clear in her texts, according to Duncan.

In Chapter Five, Duncan moves on to Locke and his criticisms of Descartes. If Locke is a dualist, says Duncan, he is a decidedly non-Cartesian dualist. The rejection of the allegedly innate idea of God stirs up the possibility of a deep connection between innatism and immaterialism. It certainly seems difficult to Duncan for a materialist to give an account of innate ideas and it would be easier for them to simply reject them. This might be why there seems to be a correlation between materialists and anti-nativists on the one hand and dualists and innatists on the other. The other criticism of Descartes that Duncan considers is Locke's rejection of the soul as always thinking. Taken together, these criticisms show that "the dualism that Locke thinks might be true is not Descartes's dualism" (p. 107).

Chapter Six investigates Locke's conceptions of substance, spirit, and God. Locke's discussion of substratum does not contribute much to a discussion of materialism in Locke because, according to Duncan, Locke is making a psychological point rather than a metaphysical one and the conception of the idea of substratum that Locke developed was that of a bare substratum. Things pick up later in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* II.xxiii where, according to Duncan, Locke is modeling his discussion on More's *Immortality of the Soul*. Duncan highlights a structural similarity between More's and Locke's treatments of substances, a similarity in their commitments to bare substrata and naked essences, and their treatments of the parallels between the ideas of bodies and the ideas of spirits. Furthermore, both More and Locke are targeting Hobbes in their discussions of the parallels between the ideas of bodies and the ideas of spirits.

Chapter Seven dives into *Essay* IV.x, where Locke proves the existence of God and that God must be a thinking being. Here Duncan is most keen on highlighting the parallels between Locke's thinking and that of Descartes and Cudworth. Duncan's focus is on *Essay* IV.x.10 where Locke argues that God is a cogitative being. There Duncan sees Locke as being "guided" by Cudworth (p. 138).

This is because he sees both as giving a "hierarchy of perfections" argument (pp. 143–146). Like Cudworth, Locke thinks that there is a hierarchy of perfections, with thought ranking above the perfections of material substances. And, like Cudworth, Locke is committed to a causal principle such that higher perfections cannot come from causes containing only lower perfections. Both theses are central features of *Essay* IV.x.10's proof that God must be a cogitative being. This does not put the issue of materialism to bed, however, in that this cogitative God might still be material. Locke addresses that in sections 13–17, again echoing Cudworth throughout the sections, according to Duncan.

Duncan discusses Locke's conflicted inclinations towards dualism and materialism in Chapter Eight. Locke is agnostic about the nature of mind because Locke rejected Cartesian dualism, on the one hand, and Hobbesian materialism, on the other. Duncan admits that Locke is officially inclined towards dualism as the more probable hypothesis, though Locke offers no reasons for that judgment (p. 162). And Duncan recognizes that many commentators attribute materialism to Locke's philosophy, focusing most particularly on Lisa Downing's interpretation of this. But all that Duncan allows to follow from Locke's philosophy is that materialism is a possibly true position, not that it is true or probably true.

The book ends with an Epilogue briefly discussing John Toland and Anthony Collins, two materialists who are considered Lockeans. Duncan concludes that Toland is a Lockean in his epistemology who also happens to be a materialist for non-Lockean reasons. Collins, however, Duncan concludes, is more of a Lockean about the mind than Toland but less clearly materialistic than Toland was.

Duncan's book is accessible and well-written. It would make a terrific addition to undergraduate courses on the history of the philosophy of mind or materialism. We are happy to recommend it.[1]

BENJAMIN HILL
University of Western Ontario
Dept. of Philosophy
Canada
bhill28@uwo.ca

ROBERT STAINTON
University of Western Ontario
Dept. of Philosophy
Canada
rstainto@uwo.ca

[1] The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of the members of the Western Ontario Early Modern Philosophy research group, who critically discussed the texts with us in the fall of 2023. This included Lorne Falkenstein, James Mackey, Fabio Malfara, Tyler Lee, Genevieve Langille, Jack Zaluski, and Aniela Kola.