



Lockean superaddition and Lockean humility



Patrick J. Connolly

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Iowa State University, 425 Catt Hall, Ames, IA 50011-1306, United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a new approach to an old debate about superaddition in Locke. Did Locke claim that some objects have powers that are unrelated to their natures or real essences? The question has split commentators. Some (Wilson, Stuart, Langton) claim the answer is yes and others (Ayers, Downing, Ott) claim the answer is no. This paper argues that both of these positions may be mistaken. I show that Locke embraced a robust epistemic humility. This epistemic humility includes ignorance of the real essences of bodies, of the causal processes underlying the production of natural phenomena, and of God's method of creation. I show how this epistemic humility offers strong support for an agnostic response to the question of superaddition. Locke did not intend to claim that bodies either do or do not have properties unrelated to their real essences. Instead, his primary goal in discussing the topic was to emphasize the strict limits to human knowledge.

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The essences also of substantiall beings are beyond our ken. The manner also how nature in this great machin of the world produces the severall phaenomena...is...what I thinke lies also out of the reach of our understandings. That wch seems to me to be suited to the end of man & lie levell to his understanding is the improvement of natural experimts for the conveniencys of this life & the way of ordering himself so as to attain happinesse in the other...

–John Locke¹

1. Introduction

Locke infamously wrote that God superadded powers to material objects. But what this act of superaddition entails is opaque. This has given rise to what I will call the problem of superaddition. Did Locke claim that some bodies have non-natural powers? Put differently, did Locke claim that some bodies have powers which do not flow from their nature, or real essence? This question has

split commentators. Some commentators, like Margaret Wilson, Matthew Stuart, and Rae Langton have argued that the answer is yes.² Other commentators, like Michael Ayers, Lisa Downing, and Walter Ott have argued that the answer is no.³

There is a lot riding on this debate. Here is a non-exhaustive list of the pressing questions related to the question of superaddition: 1) What is Locke's position on the ontology of human beings? Our understanding of Locke's relation to Hobbesian materialism, on the one hand, and Cartesian dualism, on the other, will depend on how we interpret Locke's claims about superaddition. 2) What is Locke's relationship to the mechanist hypothesis? And, by extension, to Robert Boyle? Depending on how we read the claims about superaddition, Locke may have either abandoned mechanism or bet the family farm on it. 3) What is Locke's relationship to Newton and the Newtonian achievement? The way that Locke did or did not understand gravitation and Newton's methodology is intimately linked to his position on superaddition. 4) What were Locke's views about scientific explanation? Did all scientific explanation have to make appeal to the intelligible components of the mechanist hypothesis? Or could some explanations end in the arbitrary will of

E-mail address: pconnoll@iastate.edu.

¹ Ms. Locke f.1, 127. This journal is owned by the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. The transcription is my own.

² Wilson (1979), Wilson (1982), Stuart (1998), Langton (2000).

³ Ayers, 1981, Downing, 2007, Ott, 2009. See also Ayers, 1991 and Jacobs & McNeish, 1997.

God or in irreducible quasi-Aristotelian powers? 5) How did Locke think about the role of God in the natural world? Did he offer a deist (or proto-deist) view of nature? Or did he instead have the hand of the divine pressed immediately upon many terrestrial processes?

My goal in this paper is to argue that Locke was agnostic on the question of superaddition. Locke was unsure whether God had given bodies real essences capable of generating all observed phenomena or whether something more was required. My argument, in brief, is as follows: Locke believed that the scope of human understanding was extremely limited. As a consequence of this, we have no understanding of the mechanisms underlying various natural phenomena. Put differently, reality outstrips our ability to understand it. As a result, we cannot be sure whether a given phenomenon requires anything more than the interactions between the real essences of material bodies. So Locke's epistemology offers strong support for an agnostic response to the question of superaddition.

My plan for the paper is as follows. In Section 2 I will set up the problem and introduce some of the critical texts. Section 3 will describe some features of Locke's epistemology and Section 4 will show how those features motivate an agnostic position on the question. And in Section 5 I will discuss other interpretations of Locke on superaddition and other ways of understanding the debate.

2. The problem of superaddition

There is a significant amount of primary text which has helped generate the question of superaddition in Locke. I will discuss many of the relevant passages in the paper but we can begin with two. These two passages correlate with the two phenomena most central to the debate over superaddition: gravitation and thinking matter.

In the early editions of the *Essay* Locke claimed that matter could only act on matter through local motion.⁴ Edward Stillingfleet offered an objection to Locke on the grounds that Locke accepted the findings of Newton's *Principia*. The *Principia* described a phenomenon, gravitation, in which matter acted on other matter but for which there was no explanation based on local motion. Here is part of Locke's response to Stillingfleet:

The gravitation of matter towards matter, by ways inconceivable to me, is not only a demonstration that God can, if he pleases, put into bodies powers and ways of operation, above what can be derived from our idea of body, or can be explained by what we know of matter, but also an unquestionable and every where visible instance, that he has done so.⁵

The second passage has to do with the possibility of thinking matter. Locke acknowledges the obvious point that we are thinking beings. But Locke also believes that our understanding of what it is to be a thinking being is rather tenuous. Given this uncertainty about the metaphysics underpinning thought, it is natural to ask whether material things could think. Here is part of what Locke has to say on the topic:

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... For I see no contradiction in it, that the first eternal thinking Being should, if he please, give to certain Systems of created

senseless matter, put together as he thinks fit, some degrees of sense, perception, and thought.⁶

These two passages (and others like them) have proven to be controversial for two reasons. The first reason is that they are unclear, the exact position Locke is taking is mysterious and underdetermined by the text. Locke simply does not spend enough time making his views about superaddition precise. The second, and more important, reason why these passages are controversial is a *prima facie* tension between the position they outline and one of Locke's other positions. There are a number of places in the *Essay* where Locke seems to hold that all of an object's features and properties flow from its nature (or real essence).⁷ Here is an example: "Had we such *Ideas* of Substances, as to know what real Constitutions produce those sensible Qualities we find in them, and how those Qualities flowed from thence, we could, by the specifick *Ideas* of their real Essences in our own Minds, more certainly find out their properties."⁸ So Locke's 'official position' holds that bodies do not have properties unrelated to their real essences. All of the properties of bodies should be (at least in principle) explained by their real essences, from which all the properties flow. Put differently, there are no properties of an object which are not caused by its real essence.

The two passages highlighted above, however, do not seem to fit with this picture. In the first, Locke says that the power to gravitate is beyond the capacity of mere matter. And in the second, he suggests that thought may be something over and above matter, something additional that must be specially added by God. So Locke seems to be claiming that there are or could be properties of material objects (gravitation and thought) that are unrelated to, or that do not flow from, their essences or natures.

So the idea that there are contradictory tendencies in Locke's thought has been at the heart of the debate. On one side, some have argued that although Locke thinks many or most of an object's properties flow from its real essence, Locke's statements about gravitation and thinking matter show that he did not believe this to be true of *all* properties of objects. Locke believes that some properties unrelated to a real essence are given to objects by God. Others have argued that Locke's true position is that all properties of all objects do, in fact, flow from their essences. According to these interpreters the passages which seem to suggest that God added properties unrelated to real essences, when interpreted properly, do not actually commit Locke to the existence of such properties.

3. Lockean humility

The goal of this section is to describe the sort of humility that lies at the heart of Locke's epistemology. I think that there are two central components: 1) The claim that we know very little and were designed to know very little. 2) The claim that we err seriously when we fail to acknowledge the strict limits to our knowledge. In the rest of this section I will describe both of these claims in further detail and demonstrate that, in fact, Locke was deeply committed to each. Following that, I will discuss a specific argument of Locke's—the central claim of which is that when our ideas are inadequate we must not rely on negative arguments.

⁴ 2.8.11 in the first three editions of the *Essay*. All citations to the *Essay* are to Locke, 1975.

⁵ Locke, 1823, volume 4, page 467.

⁶ 4.3.6.

⁷ 2.23.3, 3.3.17, 3.3.18, 3.6.6, 4.3.25, 4.12.9.

⁸ 4.6.11.

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