

Does Matter Think?

Introduction to the Excerpt

Descartes's philosophy had introduced a rigid separation between the spiritual and the material, so the question of the extent of matter's participation in thought was recast as the question of the "materiality" of consciousness. Late 17th-century thinkers associated with Epicureanism in France and the Deist movement in England began to toy with the idea that Man is nothing more than a Cartesian beast-machine. Richard Bentley condemned this idea in 1692, but John Locke had affirmed at least the possibility (non-contradiction) of "thinking matter" in 1690 in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (IV.III.13). So, there was a lively philosophical and theological controversy on this topic by the first decade of the 18th century.

Against this background, Henry Dodwell published *Epistolary Discourses* in 1706 supporting the materiality of the soul (made immortal at baptism!). A pamphlet war broke out among Dodwell, Samuel Clarke, and Anthony Collins, who sided with Dodwell. Samuel Clarke had attacked Dodwell in a pamphlet entitled *A Letter to Mr. Dodwell*. Collins wrote a pamphlet defending Dodwell and attacking Clarke. Clarke replied to Collins's attack, and, in the pamphlet from which this excerpt is taken, Collins attacked Clarke's reply, and so on for several more iterations.

One of Clarke's main arguments against thinking matter is that each particle of matter would have to be conscious, which would mean that the brain would consist of a multitude of separate consciousnesses, whereas we are only aware of having a single, unified consciousness.

Collins's articulation of the concept of emergence is a rejoinder to this argument: consciousness is a novel, unified causal power arising from the aggregation of the different causal powers of the individual particles. Consciousness emerges from the combination of the different (unconscious) causal powers of the parts.

—James A. Barham and John W. Keck

Excerpt

That it is nothing else but *Argumentum ad Ignorantiam*. For by enumerating three sorts of Powers or Qualitys of Matter, and showing that the two last of the sorts are improperly call'd Powers or Qualitys, he does suppose that a System of Matter has, and can have only Powers of one sort or kind, such as Magnitude and Motion, which are only the Sum or Aggregate of Powers of the same kind; which, what is it else but to argue, That because we know of no other Powers of a different kind in Matter from Magnitude and Motion, therefore it has and can have no other Powers of a different kind from Magnitude and Motion? Whereas he ought to have demonstrated, if he would have prov'd the Point he undertook to prove, that there can be no other Power in any System of

Matter, but what is the Sum or Aggregate of Powers of the same kind; and then there might have been some ground to conclude, *That if Consciousness be really inherent in a System of Matter, it must be the Sum or Result of the Consciousnesses of the several parts*: for till it is demonstrated that there can be no other Power in any System of Matter, but what is the Sum or Aggregate of Powers of the same kind, it may as well be suppos'd, that there are Powers of different kinds in different Particles of Matter, or that God can superadd different kinds of Powers to the different Parts of a material System; and then the Action or Power exerted, resulting from them [particles of matter] when united, will be of a different sort or species from any Power inhering in the Particles singly consider'd, and so far from being the Sum or Aggregate of Powers of the same kind, that the new Power will be the Sum or Aggregate of Powers of a different kind. And if so, then Mr. *Clark* must prove, that Consciousness is not an Action or actual Power resulting from an Union of different kinds of Powers, or else he will not be able to prove the Impossibility of Matter's thinking from its Divisibility, or its being actually divided in infinitum; for on supposition that there are Powers of different kinds in different parts of the same material System, and that Consciousness cannot be prov'd to be, properly speaking, an Individual Power, or a Power which can only reside in an Individual Being, there will be no reason to conclude, *That if Consciousness be really inherent in a System of Matter, it must be the Sum or Result of the Consciousnesses of the several Parts*: but the contrary, *That if Consciousness does inhere in a System of Matter, it must not be the Sum or Result of the Consciousnesses of the several Parts*; and all Mr. *Clark's* Difficultys, founded on Matter's conflicting or actually separate and distinct Parts, will be remov'd; for it will then be no *Contradiction to suppose a Power arising from Matter, without belonging to the Parts of which the Whole consists*, no more than it will be to conceive that a Whole is not the same with a piece of a Clock: for the Power resulting from the different contributing Powers in the System, neither belongs to any part of the System when consider'd by itself, nor is it of the same sort or kind with any Power in any part of the System, nor will there be any ground to *suppose an Universal to exist without Particulars*, but a particular Power existing to which several particular Powers contribute, as every Man is a particular Man, tho various Powers are necessary to constitute him of the Species: nor, lastly, to suppose an Effect produc'd without a Cause; for the different Powers in the single and separate Parts of the System of Matter, by uniting in one Operation or Power to operate, are the Cause of the Existence of that Power which did not exist in the Particles singled consider'd. And thus it may be conceiv'd, that there may be a Power in all those Particles which compose the Brain, to contribute to the act of Thinking, before they are united under that Form; tho while they are disunited, they have no more of Consciousness than any being which produces Sweetness in us (that is made up of Parts wherein different Powers inhere) when under a particular Form, has a power to produce Sweetness in us, when its parts are disunited and separated.

Anthony Collins. "That it is nothing else but *Argumentum ad Ignorantiam*," *A Reply to Mr. Clarke's Defence of His Letter to Mr. Dodwell*. London, 1707, pp. 12–15.