

THE CONCEPT OF *SPIRIT* IN LOCKE'S *ESSAY*

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Among British empiricist philosophers, both Locke and Berkeley use the term *spirit*. In Berkeley, with his denial of the existence of matter, immaterial beings, i.e. spirits, are necessarily central to his philosophy. They are divided into two sorts, created and eternal (*Principles*, sec. 6). In Berkeley's ontology of spirits and their ideas, the former seemed to be required as a support for the latter, a remnant of the substance and accident doctrine. Later, of course, Hume was to experiment with the more thoroughgoing phenomenalism of a mere succession of ideas. But in Berkeley spirits still reign supreme, and they are seen as substances or vital principles in the strongest sense; thus it is the will, and not merely the perception, of the eternal spirit that keeps the world in being, that is, provides the ideas that are reality to the created spirits. It might be thought that spirits in Berkeley are not merely minds; they are said to have minds, in which of course are the ideas; but I leave this question for the attention of Dr. Mugnai, if he wishes to mention it in his address to the Colloquio. I merely wish to point out the large part played by spirits in Berkeley.

In Locke, however, spirits are referred to less frequently. Among spirits, the usual contrast is between 'the infinite spirit' (*Essay*, II.xxiii.19) and finite spirits. There is also some mention of spirits as, presumably, disembodied souls

and various kinds of incorporeal beings (IV.xi.12). About the existence of these last we can have no knowledge, Locke says in this passage; the ideas we have of such beings do not prove their existence any more than the corresponding ideas prove that of fairies or centaurs; and they are not discoverable by the senses. On the other hand, « we have ground from revelation, and several other reasons », Locke says, « to believe with assurance, that there are such creatures ». He does not say what these other reasons are (though I would suppose it is the argument from the chain of being in III.vi.12), but the existence of finite spirits other than ourselves is 'highly probable' on the evidence of faith. The exception to this uncertainty is God alone, whose being is certain and demonstrable, according to Locke (IV.x).

Elsewhere he is more expansive about the spiritual world (which he calls 'the intellectual world' as opposed to the material). He is happy to say that the former is « a greater and more beautiful world ». In his anxiety to show the extent of our ignorance, he speaks of « that infinite number of spirits that may be, and probably are » (IV.iii.27). In this he is in agreement with his contemporaries, e.g. Milton (« Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep »). He speculates that it is « likely there are more orders » of those 'intelligences' than of 'corporeal substances', though about them we can have no certainty. (Here 'intelligence' is being used as meaning « an intelligent or rational being, [...] a spirit », to borrow part of the definition in the *O.E.D.*, s.v. *spirit*, sense 4.) In this passage Locke refers to our « very few, and those, if I may so call them, superficial ideas of spirit ». Since spirits do not have surfaces, and this figurative sense of the word 'superficial' in English is a century older than Locke, I take the apologetic formula « if I may so call them » — which he normally uses to introduce a new word or sense — to be a piece of Lockean wit.

What are these 'ideas of spirit'? Spirit is first given a

serious mention in the chapter on our ideas of substances. Locke says we must conclude that the operations of the mind belong to something other than body; so « we are apt to think these the actions of some other substance, which we call spirit » (II.xxiii.5). It is the substratum (he actually uses this term) to « thinking, knowing, doubting, and a power of moving ». Though « we have no clear and distinct idea of the substance of a spirit », this is no ground for concluding its non-existence, since body, or matter, is in the same case. That is, we still believe in the existence of matter, without having any clear and distinct idea of it, so we are equally justified in believing in the substance of a spirit, or spiritual substance, when we are familiar only with its operations.

Elsewhere in the same chapter are most of Locke's discussions of spirit. « We are able to frame the complex idea of an immaterial spirit » (sec. 15), « by putting together the ideas of thinking, perceiving, liberty, and power of moving themselves and other things ». Other ideas contained in the complex idea of a spirit, or immaterial substance, are existence, duration, and mobility (all these are common to material substance also) (sec. 18)¹. The position is summarised in sec. 30. Although « the substance of spirit is unknown to us », we have « distinct clear ideas of two primary qualities, or properties of spirit, viz. thinking, and a power of action »; whereas doubting etc.

¹ This complex idea is the nominal essence: cf. Putnam's *stereotype*, mentioned by Prof. Petöfi in his paper. According to that classification, *spirit* would appear as follows, according to Locke's idea of it:

<i>syntactic markers</i>	<i>semantic marker</i>	<i>stereotype</i>	<i>extension</i>
count noun	substance	thinking	not known
concrete		perceiving	
		liberty	
		mobility	
		motivity	
		existence	
		duration	

are said to be only modes of thinking. It is continually emphasised that we are no worse off as regards knowledge or clarity, in our 'notion of immaterial spirit' (sec. 31) than we are with that of body.

In fact, much of the time Locke is using a concept of spirit equivalent to our present concept of *mind*. 'Mind' is a term which he too does not restrict to the functions of knowledge and perception, i.e. thinking rather than moving, but does use it to include the will as a faculty. Locke wrote his early philosophical essays in Latin, so perhaps his English usage reflects the use of *mens, anima, spiritus*. Certainly, an equivalent term to *spirit* in Locke in the human cases is *soul*. This is made clear in secs. 19-20 of the chapter under consideration (II.xxiii), where the mobility of spirits is discussed: all finite spirits have the power of moving about as well as of moving other things; and my soul operates on my body by moving around with it. This appears to be known from experience: 'everyone finds in himself', etc. God alone among spirits does not have the power of motion, because of his infinity. The existence of my own soul is known to me by reflection, as a result of 'every act of sensation' (sec. 15). Compared with my knowledge of external material things, «I do more certainly know, that there is some spiritual being within me, that sees and hears». In proposing this reflective self-awareness (stated again at IV.ix.3), Locke seems to be on safer ground than Hume with his puzzled attempt to catch himself among his ideas.

There are several other passages in the *Essay* that I do not discuss, but I mention two here for the sake of completeness: III.vi.11 and IV.iii.6. Unlike some other speakers, I am not in a position to offer information on all occurrences of *spirit* in the main work under examination, nor even to estimate the number of uses of the term. (But this information will be available if Peter Nidditch goes ahead with his projected Concordance-Index: see his article on this in the *Locke Newsletter* for 1982).

Apart from Locke's fairly firm doctrines about God and human minds, there are several passages of speculation about intermediate spirits. When in angelological mood, Locke suggests that such spirits could have variable sense-organs, making them superior to us in perception (II.xxiii.13): that they have more perfect knowledge, and 'greater happiness than we', and the power of immediate communication of thoughts (sec. 36); and also, that «spirits of a higher rank than those immersed in flesh, may have as clear ideas of the radical constitution of substances, as we have of a triangle» (III.xi.23). In addition to this 'angelic chemistry' (Mackie's term), another possible advantage of the intermediate spirits is the availability to them of a constant supply of correct middle terms — 'intermediate proofs'.

I wish to say in conclusion that the approach to Locke by way of the concept of spirit is instructive, because it brings out how Locke carries out his program of examining the limits of knowledge. As I see it, his three procedures are demonstration, philosophising, and speculation. These produce respectively two sorts of knowledge (of beings, and of ideas), and belief. Or, at any rate, certainty on the one hand, assurance, i.e. probability, on the other. Thus: the being of God is demonstrated; «we have distinct clear ideas [...] of properties of spirit»; the existence of my own spirit is known from the form of experience called reflection; while «the existence of finite spirits other than ourselves is highly probable» (and this rests on revelation, the suggestions of secular writers, and in the end, feats of imagination).