

**The Achilles Argument and the Nature of Matter in the Clarke Collins
Correspondence (draft)**

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Introduction

The question whether we can establish the immateriality and immortality of the human soul was very important in the early modern period. Descartes's dualistic approach to the issue is particularly prominent and continues to receive much attention from historians of philosophy as well as from less historically inclined philosophers. But other early moderns also devoted much attention to these issues and their work in this area has not received nearly as much attention. The Achilles Argument enjoyed significant popularity during the early modern period in this debate. Prominent in the 18th century was a discussion of the argument by Samuel Clarke, best known for his correspondence with Leibniz, and Anthony Collins. Collins was a freethinker, materialist, and deist well-known at the time in England. The correspondence started off with a response by Clarke to a book by Henry Dodwell who argued that the soul is not naturally, but only supernaturally immortal: God makes it continue to exist after death. Clarke responded with an open letter in which he offered a version of the Achilles Argument. It set off a public correspondence with Collins, who took Dodwell's side. The Clarke-Collins correspondence took place during 1706-1708. It went through 6 editions, and was discussed in at least

Britain and Amsterdam throughout much of the 18th century.¹ Leibniz received the correspondence, and commented that he thought Clarke made some good points, while disagreeing with others and thus the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence was ignited.²

The correspondence took place against the background of Locke's claim that we cannot rule out the possibility that God superadds thinking to matter. Consequently, although he did think that we can establish that God is an immaterial thinking substance, Locke argued that we cannot establish the immateriality of the human mind.³ As a result Locke ignited a heated debate about the possibility of thinking matter. The thinking matter debate occupied a number of thinkers on both sides of the English Channel over the course of the next century. It has received relatively little attention from historians of philosophy, in spite of its importance at the time, and in spite of the prominence of the mind-body problem in contemporary anglo-american philosophy.⁴ A reason may be that much of the discussion was carried out by philosophers who

¹ Robin Attfield, "Clarke, Collins and Compounds", (Journal of the History of Philosophy, 15, 1977, pp. 45-54), p. 47.

² Robinet, Correspondence Leibniz-Clarke; présentée d'après les manuscrits originaux des bibliothèques de Hanovre et de Londres, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), p. 432.

³ For more on this see J.-P. Schachter's paper on Locke in this volume.

⁴ But see John W. Yolton, Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) and Locke and French Materialism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

tend to receive less attention than the canonical figures in this period— such as Berkeley, Leibniz, Hume.

Clarke's first letter, which was addressed to Dodwell, is very clear about the fact that important religious issues are at stake. Clarke claimed that an appropriate view of the afterlife is that the human soul is naturally immortal, that is, its nature is such that it cannot go out of existence as a result of natural processes. In view of this Clarke argued that the soul is simple and cannot be material. Clarke specifically criticizes Dodwell for his stance on the fate of the damned. According to Dodwell, human souls are naturally mortal, but God makes them immortal, some for happiness, others for punishment. But Clarke charges that no view can be more "harsh and incredible, than to suppose [God] by his Omnipotent *Will* and Power, eternally and miraculously preserving such Creatures unto endless Punishment, who never had in them, either *originally* or *additionally*, any *Principle of Immortality* at all." (W III 722).⁵ Clarke thinks it's better to hold that "the Immortality of the Soul, and especially of a miserable one, [derives] from its *own Nature* than from the *Divine Pleasure*". The eternal punishment of the damned must be explained by the fact that "by willful continuance in Sin, having so far depraved themselves as to become incapable of eternal Happiness, must consequently by the just Judgement of God fall into such Misery, as their immortal nature so corrupted necessarily makes them liable

⁵ The correspondence can be found in Samuel Clarke, *The Works*, (W), (London, 1738, reprint, Garland Publishing, New York 1978) vol. III. I have preserved the capitalization, punctuation, spelling and italicization of the original.

to" (ibid.).⁶ Clarke returns to the religious stakes later in the correspondence and charges that materialism is a problem for religion because it threatens free will, opens the gates to believing that all rational beings are material, including God, and raises serious problems for the afterlife, threatening the resurrection and personal identity (W III 850).

Clarke defended the natural immortality of the soul as follows. He argued that consciousness requires an "individual being" for its subject. An individual being is an entity with a strong sort of unity; indeed, it must be a simple, indivisible entity. He argued that matter can never constitute such a being. Anthony Collins was unconvinced. Sometimes he simply contends that Clarke has failed to establish his claims, and he is certainly often right. His more specific and pointed objections to the argument fall into three categories: first, he raises the question what feature of consciousness requires such a subject; second, he wonders why matter can't constitute a suitably unified individual, and third he argues that for all we know consciousness might belong to a system of matter in the following way: it might result from, or as we would now say, emerge from, material qualities that characterize the parts of the system of matter. I will examine their discussion of the first two objections. The last objection I will leave for another occasion; it occupies a large portion of the correspondence and

⁶ At the same time, while for Clarke the soul is naturally immortal, he thinks its existence always depends on God, who can annihilate it at any time, a view commonly held in the period about all creatures (W III, 722).

constitutes a very interesting discussion of emergentism that is unusually detailed for the period.⁷

My aim in this paper is to understand where the fundamental disagreements lie that divide Clarke and Collins on the possibility of thinking matter. In the first section I will discuss Clarke's initial statement of the argument and relate it to the classification of Achilles Arguments offered in the introduction to this volume. In the second section, I will turn to the discussion of what consciousness is, and why it requires a simple subject. On this point Clarke is rather disappointing: he is much more quiet than other proponents of the Achilles Argument about just what features of consciousness require a simple subject. The third section is devoted to the discussion of the nature of matter, which is crucial to Clarke's claim that matter can't constitute an individual being. This part of Clarke's discussion displays clear affinity with Leibniz, his later antagonist, but Clarke's position here is complicated by his view that the soul is extended.

This examination of the Clarke-Collins correspondence provides then the following partial assessment to the question where their fundamental

⁷ Collins also raises objections that go beyond the argument and that concern problems for the view that a soul is simple: how should we understand changes in the states in a simple entity, or its being acted upon by the body or God? And, if we accept that animals are conscious beings, must we then accept that they too have simple, and hence immortal souls? In addition, the correspondence discusses free will, personal identity, and the nature of gravity. All these questions I will leave aside.

disagreements lie on the possibility of thinking matter (leaving aside their disagreement about emergentism). No clear disagreement emerges about the nature of thought or consciousness, that is, about the question what feature requires an individual subject. But there is a clear disagreement about the question whether matter can serve as its subject that springs from differences in their conceptions of matter. A philosopher's conception of matter is an important topic for the Achilles Argument, but it is easily neglected as it is tempting to focus on the Achilles' claims about the nature of consciousness. There is then a general lesson to be drawn from the correspondence to the effect that acceptance or rejection of the Achilles may hinge on a philosopher's conception of matter.

I The Achilles Argument

In his first letter Clarke offers the following statement of the Achilles Argument:

For Matter being a divisible Substance, consisting always of separable, nay of actually separate and distinct parts, 'tis plain, that unless it were essentially Conscious, in which case every particle of Matter must consist of innumerable separate and distinct Consciousnesses, no system of it in any possible Composition or Division, can be any individual Conscious Being; For, suppose three or three hundred particles of Matter, at a Mile or any given distance one from another; is it possible that all those separate parts should in that State be one individual Conscious Being? Suppose then all these particles brought together into one System, so as to touch one another; will they thereby, or by any Motion or Composition

whatsoever, become any whit less truly distinct Beings, than they were when at the greatest distance? How then can their being disposed in any possible System, make then one individual conscious Being? If you will suppose God by his infinite Power superadding Consciousness to the united Particles, yet still those Particles being really and necessarily as distinct Beings as ever, cannot be themselves the Subject in which that individual Consciousness inheres, but Consciousness can only be superadded by the addition of Something, which in all the Particles must still it self be but one individual Being. (W III 730)

This passage has clear affinity with the classical Achilles Argument, but it does not contain a straightforward statement of it. Most notably, it does not make any claims about the unification of representations. It offers an argument that in effect starts with the conclusion of what in this volume is called a Narrow Achilles. Recall a Narrow Achilles has the following structure:

P1: Unification of representations takes place.

P2: Only a simple, unified substance can unify representations.

Therefore,

C1: The human soul (or mind) is a simple unified substance.

Clarke here uses as a premise the claim that the subject of consciousness is a unified substance, and offers an argument for the immateriality of the soul, so in this initial statement he offers a version of the second half of a Broad Achilles which, recall, goes as follows:

C1: The human soul is a simple unified substance.

P3: If the human soul is a simple unified substance, then it is not material.

P4: If the human soul is a simple unified substance then it is immortal.

Therefore,

C2: The human soul is immaterial and immortal.

The version Clarke offers here can be schematized as follows:

- (1) The subject of consciousness is an individual being.
- (2) Matter is infinitely divisible, any piece of matter consists of distinct parts, and cannot be one individual being.
- (3) Matter cannot be a subject of consciousness.

And the subject of consciousness is the human soul. Clarke does not claim that the subject of consciousness must be simple, he says that it must be an individual being. The argument suggests that the subject must have a suitable type of unity, thus in principle leaving open the possibility of a composite subject. He then argues against the possibility of matter ever having that sort of unity. In fact it becomes clear that an individual subject must be simple for Clarke. As we saw, Clarke was much concerned with the (natural) immortality of the soul, but its immateriality is the focus of the discussion with Collins.

Clarke's argument raises immediately the following question: given that he does not offer an explicit Narrow Achilles, what ground does Clarke believe he has for asserting that consciousness requires an individual being for a subject? Does he rely on the unification of representations? This question is the subject of the next section, where we will see that Clarke does eventually offer something akin to the Narrow Achilles.

At this point it is useful to note the relationship of Clarke and Collins' positions to Locke's – indeed, it is worth noting that both sometimes refer to Locke to support their arguments. Like Clarke, Locke thought that emergentism

is not a possibility.⁸ In arguing for God being an immaterial, thinking substance he addresses the question whether thinking could emerge from material qualities and writes:

... Matter, *incogitative* Matter and Motion, whatever changes it might produce of figure and bulk, *could never produce Thought*: Knowledge will still be as far beyond the Power of Motion and Matter to produce, as Matter is beyond the Power of *nothing*, or *nonentity* to produce. (Locke, Essay IV.X.10, p. 623)⁹

But Locke was famous in the period for arguing that we cannot rule out the possibility that God superadds thinking to matter:

We have *Ideas* of Matter and *Thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know, whether any mere material Being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own *Ideas*, without revelation, to discover whether Omnipotency has not given to some System of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think or else joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial Substance ... (Essay IV.iii.6, pp. 540-1).

So Clarke and Locke agree in rejecting emergentism, and they both accepted a version of property dualism. But unlike Locke, Clarke thinks he can rule out the

⁸ But for an alternative interpretation see M.R. Ayers, "Mechanism, Superaddition, and the Proof of God's Existence in Locke's Essay", Philosophical Review 40, 1981, pp. 210-251.

⁹ An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Peter H. Nidditch ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

possibility of one substance being both material and thinking by divine superaddition. Like Leibniz, Clarke thought that God would have to add a substance that does the thinking.¹⁰ Collins, on the other hand, went farther than Locke and accepted both the possibility of one substance being material and thinking, and the possibility of thinking emerging from material qualities.

2 Consciousness

What about consciousness requires an individual subject, according to Clarke? He introduces his reliance on the nature of consciousness quite deliberately:

That the Soul cannot possibly be *Material*, is evident not only from the consideration of its noble Faculties, Capacities and Improvements, its large Comprehension and Memory; its Judgment, Power of Reasoning,

¹⁰ On this issue Clarke is in agreement with Leibniz. See Leibniz' letter to Damaris Masham of June 30, 1704, G III 355-6, translated in Leibniz's 'New System' and Associated Contemporary Texts, R.S. Woolhouse and Richards Francks transl. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), pp. 211-212. Unless indicated otherwise, the references to Leibniz' writings in the original languages can be found in Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, C.I. Gerhardt ed., 7 vols., Berlin, Wiedmann, 1875-90, repr. Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1978 (G). Translations can generally be found in G.W. Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber eds., Indianapolis, Hackett, 1989 (AG), and in Philosophical Papers and Letters, Leroy E. Loemker ed., Dordrecht, Reidel, 1969 (L).

and Moral Faculties; which Arguments have been urged with unanswerable Strength by the wisest and most considerate Men in all Ages from the times of *Socrates* and *Plato* to this very Day; but the same thing is moreover demonstrable from the single consideration, even of bare Sense or Consciousness it self. (W III 730)

Clarke is intent on distinguishing his argument from a tradition of arguing for the immateriality of the soul from the nature of the higher faculties of the human soul or mind. He explicitly separates his argument from ones proposed in the days of Socrates and Plato (without, however, noting what specific arguments he has in mind). This approach sets him apart also from an argument found in Aquinas and other scholastics who argued that the nature of the human intellect requires an immaterial subject (see, for instance, *Summa theologiae* 1.75.2).

Similarly, in the *Discourse on Method* Descartes had argued that humans have a soul that is something beyond the body on the basis of higher human capacities: our linguistic capacity and the particularly wide range of human capacities that distinguish us from machines and beasts (AT VI 55-60/CSM I 139-141).^{11, 12}

¹¹ Reference to Descartes's writings are as follows: AT: Charles Adam and Paul Tannery eds., *Œuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols. (Paris: CNRS and Vrin: 1964-176); CSM: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-1991).

¹² Descartes's best-known argument for dualism, which can be found in the *Meditations* and *Principles* is often regarded as more broadly focused on consciousness where consciousness extends to sense and imagination -- lower human capacities -- as well as intellect. But some scholars, including myself,

Also worth considering is the comparison with Leibniz. Leibniz thought that monads are simple beings, characterized by perceptions and appetites. Perception he describes as “a state that contains and represents a multitude in a unity or in a simple substance” (Monadology 14). Simply put, there is a sense in which Clarke and Leibniz agree that the mental requires a simple subject, although for Leibniz not all mental states, perceptions, are characterized by consciousness.¹³

think the argument is based on features of the intellect, as was the case for Aquinas. Various texts suggest as much, and Descartes himself claimed that sensation actually indicates the union of the mind with the body rather than their distinctness. For discussion, see Margaret Wilson, Descartes (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 177-185, and especially pp. 200-201, and my Descartes’s Dualism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 2.

¹³ This agreement is not necessarily easy to state. For Leibniz the states of monads are all perceptions, but only a subset of those are thoughts and not nearly all are conscious. Thus interpreters have sometimes denied that Leibnizian perceptions in general are mental (McRae, Leibniz: Perception, Apperception and Thought Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976, p. 24), or have preferred to label them as semi-mental (Robert M. Adams, Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). I do think of perceptions as mental for Leibniz, but these complications raise the question in what sense this may be true. For discussion, see Alison Simmons “Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness, The Philosophical Review, 110, 2001, pp. 31-75. Simmons argues that while for

One consequence of Clarke's approach is that it raises questions about the status of animal souls. In their defense of the immateriality of the soul in view of its immortality Aquinas and Descartes focused on capacities they presumed to be peculiar to humans. Consequently their arguments supported immortality for human souls, but not for the souls of non-rational animals.¹⁴ But Clarke's focus on consciousness prompts Collins to query him about the souls of animals: are they too immaterial and naturally immortal? Clarke does not really resolve this issue.¹⁵

So one thing Clarke makes clear is that his argument is not limited to higher mental powers such as intellectual ones, or moral ones. But that still leaves us with the question what about consciousness requires a genuine individual for a subject and excludes the possibility of thinking matter. When Collins objects that Clarke has not explained what consciousness is, or why it does require such a subject, Clarke offers the following response:

Consciousness, in the most strict and exact Sense of the Word, signifies neither a Capacity of Thinking, nor yet Actual Thinking, but the Reflex Act by which I know that I think, and that my Thoughts and Actions are my own and not Another's. But in the present Question, the Reader needs not trouble himself with this Nicety of Distinction; but may understand it indifferently in all or any of these Significations; because the Argument

Descartes the mental is characterized by consciousness, for Leibniz it is representationality.

¹⁴ Descartes insists on this point in the Discourse AT VI 55-60, CSM I 139-141.

¹⁵ For discussion of animals see W III 776-7, 795, 816.

proves universally, that Matter is neither capable of this *Reflex Act*, nor of the first *Direct Act*, nor of the *Capacity of Thinking* at all. (W III 784).

Clarke's characterization of consciousness in the strict sense as "the *Reflex Act* by which I know that I think, and that my Thoughts and Actions are my own and not another's" is quite precise and offers a very specific view of what consciousness is. He is not talking about the kind of awareness that is at issue in recent arguments about the nature of what it's like to be conscious, aware, experiencing various types of sensations, as in discussions generated by Nagel's "What is it like to be a bat?" Clarke is talking about self-consciousness in the sense of consciousness of one's mental states as one's own. So is something about self-consciousness what requires a simple subject for Clarke?

Elsewhere in this volume,¹⁶ we saw that among the neo-platonists there were two types of Achilles Arguments; one relies on the unification of representation, another focuses on self-knowledge. Proclus in particular argued that self-knowledge requires a simple subject: self-knowledge is a kind of "reverting on oneself", and this requires "both elements becoming one—both the reverted subject and that on which it has reverted. But this is impossible for a body, and, in general, for any divisible substance" (Proposition 15).

But in the above quote Clarke immediately makes clear that he is not focused on consciousness in the strict sense: he writes that the argument shows that thinking in general requires an immaterial subject – again without, alas, explaining why. Indeed, later he writes that he does not need to explain what consciousness is because "Every Man feels and knows by Experience what

¹⁶ See the chapter by Devin Henry.

Consciousness is, better than any Man can explain it: Which is the Case of all simple Ideas" (W III 790).

It is tempting to think that what moves Clarke is the Achilles Argument proper: unification of representations requires a simple subject. And an important line of thought in his letters suggests as much. Thus he writes that his own consciousness is "truly one undivided Consciousness, and not a multitude of distinct Consciousnesses added together" (W III 784). Collins never contests this claim, and Clarke does not volunteer to explain it. Their disagreements are focused elsewhere. Clarke offers this claim when he explains an important implicit premise of his Achilles Argument, which I will call the Homogeneity Principle -- a principle also cited by Kant in the Second Paralogism account of the Achilles Argument. Here is a statement of this principle by Clarke:

... it is evident at first sight, that every Power or Quality that is or can be *inherent* in any System of Matter is nothing else than the Sum or Aggregate of so many powers or qualities *of the same kind*, inherent in all its Parts. The *Magnitude* of any Body is nothing but the Sum of the Magnitudes of all its Parts. Its *Motion*, is nothing but the Sum of the Motions of all its Parts. And if *Cogitation* in like manner could possibly be a Quality really *inherent* in a system of matter, it must likewise necessarily be the Sum and Result of the Cogitations of the several Parts: and so there would be as many distinct Consciousnesses, as there are Particles of Matter, of which the System consists; Which I suppose will be granted to be very absurd. Compositions or Divisions of *Magnitude*, varied in infinite manners to Eternity, can produce nothing in the whole System no Quality or Power whatsoever but *mere Magnitude*. (W III 759)

Clarke thinks that a genuine quality must be the sum of qualities of the same kind if its subject is composite. There are types of qualities, or rather so-called qualities, to which this principle does not apply (W III 759-760), but he thinks that consciousness is a genuine quality that inheres in a subject and so if consciousness belongs to a composite subject, each and every part of that subject is conscious. That consequence is absurd, he claims. Collins agrees that it is (W III 806).

Indeed, instead of explaining what about consciousness implies that it cannot be the sum of a multitude of consciousnesses Clarke repeatedly simply focuses on the absurdity of there being a multitude of consciousnesses corresponding to the multitude of material particles. Thus in his third letter Clarke writes that he takes Collins' acceptance of the absurdity of this claim to indicate his acceptance of the idea that consciousness is an individual power, that is, it is "really One and not Many" (W III 784). And in his second letter he had written:

And if *Cogitation* in like manner [in the same way as motion and magnitude] could possibly be a Quality really *inherent* in a System of Matter, it must likewise necessarily be the Sum and Result of the Cogitations of the several Parts: And so there would be as many distinct consciousnesses as there are particles of Matter, of which the System consists; Which I suppose will be granted to be very absurd. (W III 759, underlining added)¹⁷

¹⁷ In this passage Clarke writes about the absurdity of the idea that all the parts of the conscious subject are conscious. But Clarke's line of reasoning in his initial

So Clarke never explains what about consciousness entails that his consciousness can't be the sum of a multitude of consciousnesses.

One might be tempted to conclude from the above that Clarke really only objects to there being a multitude of conscious material particles, not so much to consciousness being a composite of consciousnesses of distinct parts. But I do not think this interpretation is right. One reason is this: as I noted above, Clarke inferred from Collins' rejection of the possibility of a multitude of conscious material particles that Collins regarded consciousness as an individual power. This inference requires that it is something about consciousness itself that makes this possibility absurd, rather than just the oddity of a swarm of conscious material particles. And later we will see another context where this issue arises: to Collins' puzzlement, Clarke holds that the soul is extended, but he insists that the soul thinks as a whole rather than in virtue of parts and again insists that consciousness can't be a composite of consciousnesses (W III 843).

So Clarke does not explain why consciousness cannot be composite in this sense. He may have the unification of representations in mind; but he does not become explicit about this. Given his failure to bring up the issue of unification when prompted to explain what consciousness is and why it requires an individual subject we cannot be sure that this is what he had in mind.

statement of the Achilles Argument presents a stronger version of the problem: he claims that the possibility of a material conscious being requires that matter would have to be essentially conscious and so all matter would be conscious (W III 730). He never explains the claim that matter would have to be essentially conscious, nor does Collins ask him about it.

Furthermore, since he claims that he does not really need to explain what consciousness is, and that we know from experience what consciousness is and that it cannot be explained, he may simply think that it is obvious from experience that one's consciousness is not a composite of distinct consciousnesses.¹⁸ I must confess, however, that I wish he had explained just what feature of consciousness requires a simple subject; this would have made his position more satisfying. Furthermore, if one conceives of the Achilles Argument as essentially involving a claim about unification of representations, then strictly speaking Clarke does not offer an Achilles Argument. But he does offer something close to it, relying on the Homogeneity Principle:

- (1) Consciousness cannot be the sum of a multitude of consciousnesses.
- (2) If consciousness belongs to a composite subject, that is, a subject that is not simple and consists of parts and not an individual being, it is a multitude of consciousnesses.
- (3) Consciousness can only belong to an individual being, that is, a simple subject.

Collins does not prod Clarke further about what feature of consciousness rules out that it can be the sum of a multitude of consciousnesses and he does not argue for the view that it can. In his initial response he did ask Clarke why matter could not ever constitute an individual subject, which is the subject of the next section. And he pursues at length in the correspondence the possibility that the consciousness of a composite subject might instead result from, that is, emerge from, other, material qualities that belong to the parts of a composite

¹⁸ As Lorne Falkenstein pointed out to me.

subject. Both Clarke and Collins understand emergentism (which I will leave aside in this paper) to avoid the absurdity of the multitudes of material particles are conscious. Clarke answers that proposal using the Homogeneity Principle and by arguing that material qualities fail to be of the same kind as consciousness.

3 Matter

One of Collins' main lines of objection to Clarke's argument is that he sees no problem with the possibility of matter constituting a genuine individual, something suitably unified so that it can be the subject of a single consciousness. I want to turn now to the treatment of matter in the correspondence, an issue that is very important to the Achilles Argument although rarely the focus of its attention. The crucial point is this: when the argument is used to rule out the possibility of a material thinking subject it requires that a material being cannot have the requisite type of unity. We saw that in his initial statement of the argument Clarke insisted that matter cannot be unified so as to constitute a genuine individual:

For *Matter* being a divisible Substance, consisting always of separable, nay of actually separate and distinct parts, 'tis plain, that unless it were essentially Conscious, in which case every particle of Matter must consist of innumerable separate and distinct Consciousnesses, no system of it in any possible Composition or Division, can be any individual Conscious Being; For, suppose three or three hundred particles of Matter, at a Mile or any given distance one from another; is it possible that all those separate parts should in that State be one individual Conscious Being? Suppose

then all these particles brought together into one System, so as to touch one another; will they thereby, or by any Motion or Composition whatsoever, become any whit less truly distinct Beings, than they were when at the greatest distance? How then can their being disposed in any possible System, make then one individual conscious Being? (W III 730)

Collins is not convinced:

Why may not several Particles of Matter, when united in one System, become an Individual Being, and be by the Power of God rendered incapable of any Division or Separation by Natural Causes, and consequently be a Subject capable of Thinking? If several Particles of Matter can be so united as to touch one another, or closely to adhere; wherein does the Distinctness or Individuality of the several Particles consist? (W III 751)

In response Clarke considers the possibility of an indivisible, in his words, indiscerpible, particle of matter that thinks. He says that such a thinking being would be naturally immortal, and that is what was at issue. But, he continues, such a particle of matter would not be possible: "For it is necessarily included in the Nature of Solid Substance, how *small* soever it be conceived to be, to consist still of Parts not essentially connected, and not at all depending on each other for their Existence." (W III 761) God could divide any particle of matter. Clarke and Collins seem to have a fundamental disagreement about the nature of matter.

What is the source of this disagreement?

Clarke accepted a conception of matter that he shared with Descartes and Leibniz and many others in this period. According to this conception of matter, it consists of actually distinct parts that do not depend on each other for their

existence. Thus Descartes thought of matter, extended substance, as infinitely divisible, and he regarded all its parts as really distinct from one another. Each part exists in its own right, and does not depend on others for its existence and so all parts of matter are separable. Given that the parts of matter are really distinct, matter consists of actually distinct parts.¹⁹

Clarke's argument that bringing the parts of matter close together so that they touch does not result in an individual being is strikingly similar to an argument Leibniz offered. Leibniz argued that the proximity of material objects does not result in genuine unity, the kind of unity Leibniz thought is necessary for something being a substance:

For suppose that there are two stones, one for example the diamond of the Great Duke, the other that of the Great Mogul. One could impose the same collective name for the two, and one could say it is a pair of diamonds, but one could not say that these two diamonds constitute a substance. More or less does not make any difference here. Even if one

¹⁹ This is not an uncontroversial interpretation of Descartes. It follows, however, from (1) the real distinction of all the parts of matter as stated in Principles I.60, in combination with (2) Descartes's claim that real distinction is a distinction between substances and (3) an understanding of substances as not merely separable but actually distinct beings each of which exists in its own right. So the real distinction of the parts of matter does not merely mean that they can exist apart but it means something about their actual mode of existence. Each part of matter actually is a distinct being that exists in its own right. For discussion of Descartes's notion of real distinction see my Descartes's Dualism, ch. 1, pp. 3-8.

brings them closer to one another and makes them touch, they will not be substantially united. Suppose that after they touch one joins another body to them capable of preventing their separation, for instance, if they were set in a single ring, all this would only make them an accidental being – *unum per accidens*. (G II 76, AG 79)

So Leibniz thinks that united parts of matter fail to constitute a substantial unity just as much as scattered parts do. Leibniz does not phrase his argument in the same terms as Clarke: Leibniz uses the notion of substance, Clarke does not. But elsewhere Clarke does use this notion while arguing that matter cannot think because it lacks the requisite type of unity: “No matter is *one* substance, but a *heap* of substances. And that I take to be the reason why matter is a subject incapable of thought”.^{20, 21}

²⁰ “The Answer to a Sixth Letter Being part of a letter written to another gentleman”, in A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God And Other Writings, Ezio Vailati ed., Cambridge University Press, 1998 (DBAG), p. 116.

²¹ Leibniz’s discussions of matter bring out an important point: the above argument addresses the Cartesian conception of matter where the essence of matter consists in extension and nothing more. Leibniz argued that on that conception matter cannot be a substance because it lacks the requisite unity. He also argued that there must be something underlying extension in order for matter to be real, there must be something that is extended: extension cannot constitute the nature of substance, and so cannot be the fundamental level of reality (See for instance, letter to de Volder, 24 march/3 April 1699, G II 169-170/ AG 261). Leibniz proposes soul-like entities -- substantial forms, and later in

But Collins simply does not see the point: why can't a chunk of matter be an individual being, what's lacking in its unity if the parts touch? Clarke does not offer an explanation and the deeper source of their disagreement does not become explicit. Part of Clarke's motivation is clearly that he thinks of matter consisting of actual parts; this is why it cannot be the subject of consciousness as it would result in a multitude of consciousnesses. This was, as I noted above, a very common view in the period. The difficulty is then how to explain the unity of a piece of matter: what can unify the parts of matter into a genuine individual or substance? Clarke and Leibniz thought nothing could.

One way to reject Clarke's position is by arguing that matter does not consist of actually distinct parts. A minority of philosophers in the period rejected the actual parts doctrine, and held that a piece of matter has potential parts only.²² Matter may be infinitely divisible (the disagreement with the

his life, monads -- to do the job. Clarke and Collins are working with the Cartesian conception of matter Leibniz criticizes, although they often adopt a Lockean formulation: matter is solid substance.

²² For extensive discussion see Thomas Holden, The Architecture of Matter, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. Collins expresses puzzlement over Clarke's claim that matter is both divisible and "consists of actually separate and distinct Parts": the latter description suggests that matter is actually divided, why add that it is divisible, Collins asks (W III 751)? This description of matter is confusing, perhaps, but not uncommon in the period. For discussion, see Holden, pp. 75-131, especially pp. 106-108 where he discusses an argument to the effect that

atomists is another matter), but it does not consist in actual parts. Parts arise as a result of actual dividing up and separating, or, according to some, by dividing in thought.

Initially it seems as if Collins does not accept the actual parts doctrine. Thus he writes: "If several Particles of Matter can be so united as to touch one another, or closely to adhere; wherein does the Distinctness or Individuality of the several Particles consist?" Once particles are united so that they touch, this question by Collins suggests he thinks they have lost their distinctness. On that view, a piece of matter may well be a unitary being, Clarke to the contrary. And then couldn't matter be the subject of thought? However, later Collins expresses agreement with the actual parts doctrine (W III 769, 772). So this is not why he envisions that matter could constitute an individual being.

Collins not only suggests that a piece of matter may be an individual being, but also that he does not see why it could not be "by the Power of God rendered incapable of any Division or Separation by Natural Causes, and consequently be a Subject capable of Thinking". Collins' remarks implicitly raise the following question: what is the problem for thinking matter, according to Clarke? Is the problem (1) that matter has actually distinct parts, or (2) the modal idea that these parts could be separated? The questions are closely connected for Clarke as for him the sense in which matter has actual parts involves the idea that the parts can be separated. Unlike matter, space does not have real parts

actual separation of parts "is only possible if those parts exist as distinct entities in the first place."

because its parts cannot be separated even in thought. But two different questions arise for the question whether matter can think.

Clarke clearly sees problems on both counts: matter having actually distinct parts is a problem because the Homogeneity Principle requires that the consciousness of a composite subject be the sum of the consciousnesses of its parts and this is not acceptable. In addition, he addresses the modal problem when he argues that if the parts of a divisible subject of consciousness were separated, by the power of God, there is no acceptable way to answer the question what happens to the consciousness of the original whole (W III 761). Collins' proposal that God might make the parts of matter inseparable directly addresses only the modal issue, not the non-modal problem.

But Clarke thinks that matter is inherently divisible into separable parts and rejects Collins' suggestion that God can make it indivisible:

For it is necessarily included in the nature of Solid Substance, how *small* soever it be conceived to be, to consist still of Parts not essentially connected, and not at all depending on each other for their Existence. So that it is absolutely impossible and contradictory, to suppose any Particle of Matter so truly an Individual, but that by the Power of God (for the Powers of Nature here are nothing to the purpose) it may be divided into two or more Particles, which shall each of them separately be as Perfect and Compleat Matter, and continue to have all the very same Properties, as the whole Particle had before it was divided. (761, emphasis added)

Clarke's response is puzzling, at least at first sight, in view of his stated goal to defend natural immortality: he now claims that the "Powers of Nature here are nothing to the purpose". And doesn't Clarke's claim that matter will always be

divisible by God leave open the possibility that God might make matter indivisible by natural powers and so be naturally immortal in a sense?

But in fact this sense of natural immortality would not do for Clarke. He had said that thinking of God as making the souls of people destined for hell immortal such that they can suffer eternally is unacceptable. What matters is that the immortality of the soul should not be the result of an act of God but of its own nature, and so this should rule out God making the soul indivisible.

But there is a further problem: Clarke's view seems to be that matter is always divisible by God, but there are particles that cannot be divided by natural powers.²³ But if so, then he seems to allow for naturally immortal particles of matter. If only God can divide such a particle, how is it any less naturally immortal than Clarke's naturally immortal indiscernible soul, which depends on God for its existence and so can be annihilated by God?

Most of the discussion focuses, however, not on immortality and the modal question of divisibility, but on whether matter can think and Clarke's view about matter as inherently composite and consisting of actually distinct parts: it follows, he thinks, that if a subject of consciousness is material, it contains a multitude of consciousnesses. Collins also rejects this idea, so his conception of matter and consciousness must allow for consciousness to belong to a chunk of matter in such a manner as to avoid this result. He needs to hold that consciousness can belong to a material subject as a whole, as a single

²³ Collins reports Clarke as holding this view (W III 774), and the quote above suggests it.

individual subject, as Clarke would say, and not in virtue of each of the parts being conscious.

Developing such a view requires more than denying Clarke's view that matter essentially consists of actual parts. For instance, it seems right that the magnitude of a body is the sum of the magnitudes of its parts, whether or not one thinks of the parts of matter as actual or merely potential. But things must work differently for consciousness and so Collins has to explain why and how. In the end, however, Collins develops his materialism not by defending the possibility of a material individual subject, but by turning to the scenario on which consciousness emerges from material qualities, a scenario which he envisions does not require that the parts of the material subject are conscious or that they acquire the right sort of unity to count as an individual subject.

4 The Extended Soul

Clarke's position is complicated by the fact like Newton and Henry More he held that spiritual substances including God and the human soul are extended. As he explains to Leibniz, Clarke thinks that interaction with the body requires the soul to be extended.²⁴ So Clarke must allow for a sense of extension for the soul that does not entail that the soul has parts each of which is a distinct

²⁴ Clarke, *Works* III, 11-12. For discussion see Ezio Vailati, "Clarke's Extended Soul", (*Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 31, 1993), pp. 388-390. Clarke appeals to the need for a substance to be where it acts seeing the alternative as action at a distance.

subject of consciousness. Collins expresses puzzlement about this: doesn't extension entail parts and divisibility at least by God (W III 775)?

Clarke explains that the sense of extension is different for the soul, it is not *partes extra partes*, a phrase common in scholasticism for describing the extension characteristic of bodies (W III 762). The extension of the soul is instead like the extension of space, Clarke argues. He contends on various occasions in his writings that the parts of space are dependent on one another, they are not separable even in thought, unlike the parts of matter. Thus he writes to Leibniz:

For infinite space is one, absolutely and essentially indivisible. And to suppose it parted is a contradiction in terms, because there must be space in the partition itself, which is to suppose it parted and yet not parted at the same time. (G VII 368/L 685)

Parts in the corporeal sense of the word are separable, compounded, ununited, independent on and movable from each other. But infinite space, though it may by us be partially apprehended, that is may in our imagination be conceived as composed of parts, yet those parts (improperly so called) being essentially indiscernible and immovable from each other, and not partible without an express contradiction in terms ..., space is in itself essentially one and absolutely indivisible. (G VII 383-384/L 693).

So the independence and separability of the parts of matter is crucial and distinguishes them from spatial parts. Similarly then, the soul, while extended, does not have separable parts.

Collins finds the analogy with space unsatisfactory on two grounds: space is infinitely extended and it is the absence of bodies, whereas the immaterial

substance that is the soul is finite and it is really something. He contends that the idea that space is not a real being or substance is illustrated by the fact that it cannot be acted upon (W III 814).

Clarke responds that the infinity of space is not relevant; it does not explain why the parts of space are interdependent, the reason lies in “the contradiction which a separation of them manifestly would imply” (W III 794). Indeed, it seems right that we cannot even in thought separate the parts of space in the sense that we cannot imagine parts of space being separated. Furthermore, while he does not say so to Collins, Clarke also rejected the idea that space is nothing, as the following reply to Leibniz suggests. He writes that those who accept the Leibnizian view that

... space is nothing but a relation between two bodies are guilty of the absurdity of supposing that which is nothing to have *real* qualities. For the space which is between two bodies is always unalterably just what it was and has the very same dimensions, quantity and figure whether these, or any other bodies be there, or anywhere else or not at all ...

(DBAG 114-115)

How well has Clarke explained the difference between space and matter with respect to their having parts in view of his position that the soul is extended in a sense that allows it to be a subject of thought? It is fairly clear in what sense Clarke wants to say matter has parts but space does not in the modal sense. His claim that the parts of matter are, but the parts of space are not separable even in thought addresses the modal question of the divisibility of matter and thus immortality. But what of the non-modal question? Does Clarke’s analogy with

space give us a sense of extension for the soul that rules out that it has parts each of which will have to be conscious in virtue of the Homogeneity Principle?

Intuitively it would seem that space does have actual parts in a sense relevant to that issue, even if they are not separable. For my chair is in one part of space, my desk in another. If the soul is extended in the sense in which space is, would it not have parts in a sense that raises the worry about a multitude of consciousnesses just as in the case for the parts of a material subject?

Collins does not raise this question, but Clarke offers several remarks that in fact address it. For the soul, he suggests, one must conceive of a substance created by God that is without separable parts and essentially one. And most clearly to the point he claims that the soul is the subject of each mental state as a whole (W III 843).²⁵ Similarly he writes about space:

The immensity of space, it being throughout absolutely uniform and essentially indivisible, is no more inconsistent with simplicity than the uniform successive flowing of the parts of duration, as you most rightly observe, are inconsistent with simplicity. (DBAG, 116)

Clarke here adduces an analogy with time that he brings up repeatedly, and which, I must confess, I find quite unhelpful.²⁶ But the useful point in this quote is the point that space is absolutely uniform: it is undifferentiated by qualities -- in some sense. For on the other hand, his claim to Leibniz that a part of space does have “dimensions, quantity and figure” suggests that he thinks space is differentiated by qualities in *some* sense.

²⁵ See also “The Answer to a Sixth Letter”, DBAG, 116.

²⁶ For discussion see Vailati, “Clarke’s Extended Soul”.

So perhaps the solution is to say that there are distinctions among qualities in relation to space: to put it simply, space is subject to various primary qualities in the Boylean sense (although not, of course, motion). But perhaps Clarke could distinguish between the qualities space does have, size, shape, and ones it does not have, ones that would make it lose its qualitative uniformity. It makes some intuitive sense to say that variations in size for spaces is compatible with some sort of qualitative uniformity. Indeed, matter was commonly thought in this period to have primary qualities but otherwise be qualitatively uniform. At the same time, a difference between space and the soul might be a problem here: space seems to be qualitatively uniform because it is arguably free of qualities other than the primary ones. But the soul is supposed to have conscious states. So the analogy is imperfect.

Furthermore, Clarke writes that God's individual consciousness has no size (you can't speak of "an ell or a mile of consciousness"). But the analogy with space, and Clarke's view that the soul must be extended in view of interaction suggests that the soul does have a size, even if its parts are not separable. Collins asks: if the soul is extended could not God vary its size (W III 775)? And then if the soul thinks as a whole its thought would have the same size in the same (perhaps non-literal) sense in which the redness of an apple would seem to have a size. That seems distinctly odd.

Perhaps this is pushing the analogy with space too far. Perhaps its usefulness is exhausted by a more limited goal: rather than demonstrating the precise sense in which the soul is extended, perhaps the extension of space can demonstrate that it is possible for something to be extended without having actual, separable parts. Needless to say, however, Clarke's view that the soul is

extended remains fairly unclear. Indeed, Clarke is not blind to the fact that there are difficulties. At one point he writes in response to Collins' questions about the soul being extended:

I take it to be demonstrated, that the Soul is an *immaterial indiscerpible Substance* :... But conceiving Immateriality not to exclude Extension, and supposing the Difficulties arising from that Hypothesis to be such as could not be clearly answered; yet this would not weaken the foregoing Proof, unless that Argument could otherwise be shown to be in itself defective. For there are many Demonstrations even in abstract Mathematicks themselves, which no Man who understands them can in the least doubt of the Certainty of, which yet are attended with difficult Consequences that cannot perfectly be cleared, The *infinite Divisibility of Quantity*, is an instance of this kind. (W III, 794)

He adds God's eternity "than which nothing is more self-evident" and God's immensity as other examples. While holding that the soul is extended, Clarke seems to express here a deeper attachment to the immateriality and indivisibility of the soul. And he contends that things are no better if one supposes the soul to be unextended. Either way, he suggests there are questions we cannot answer, an appropriate expression of humility.²⁷

²⁷ Lest the reader, partial to Collins' position, rashly take his side on this particular point, Collins promptly misunderstands Clarke's admission. Clarke had admitted to questions he could not answer, Collins takes this to be an admission of "*Contradictions and Absurdities*" in Clarke's position (W III 814). Clarke's responds that this misrepresents what he had said (W III 849).

Conclusion

In sum, Clarke offers a version of the Achilles Argument that focuses on the second half of a Broad Achilles, and argues from the requirement of what he calls an individual subject to the immateriality of the soul. He begins the correspondence aiming to defend the natural immortality of the soul, but the discussion with Collins focuses on its immateriality. In defense of the need for a simple subject of consciousness, Clarke does not talk about the need for unification of representations, or, as Proclus did, on self-knowledge. He leaves us in the dark about just what about consciousness requires a simple subject, claiming merely that consciousness cannot be the sum of a multitude of consciousnesses. He does not say why, thinking perhaps that this is obvious, and Collins does not question this claim. The correspondence contains more on the question of the nature of matter --as well as a lengthy discussion of emergentism, which I leave for another occasion. Collins questions Clarke's claim that matter cannot be an individual subject. While some thinkers in the period would reject Clarke's view that matter consists of actually distinct parts, Collins does not endorse that position, and so he does not make clear how a material entity could have the sort of unity required for an individual subject. I have discussed their exchange on this issue at some length. I hope this discussion highlights a fact easily ignored about the Achilles Argument; it is tempting to focus on what views about the nature of the mental support the Achilles, but assumptions about the nature of matter are just as important for the argument.