

Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment

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In spite of the time period implied in her subtitle, Ann Thomson's book covers debates about the materiality of the soul from 1650 to the early 19th century. She deals with a vast range of thinkers – primarily in England and France, but also in the Netherlands. Her central thesis, at least in the early chapters of the book, is that the English defenders of the materiality of the soul were sincere Christians who based their views on scripture, as well as science. In this respect her book is about the unintended consequences of the English materialism she discusses in these chapters. In later chapters she explains how these ideas were received in very different contexts, for example, mid 18th-century France, where they were used to attack religion and support atheism. In general, her book describes the increasing secular conception of human beings, and in particular of their souls. Its greatest strength is also its greatest weakness: Thomson eschews any kind of taxonomy of the ideas or periods she discusses and focuses on the debates themselves as they occur at different times and places. She interweaves names and doctrines into her narrative in a way that conveys dazzling learning, but often leaves her reader lost in details.

After an introductory chapter focused mainly on historiographical issues, Thomson turns in her second chapter (“The Church in Danger”: Latitudinarians, Socinians, and Hobbists’) to the debates about the soul in England in the decade following the Glorious Revolution. Her central argument in this chapter is political. She argues that moderate Whig Low Churchmen, including the Latitudinarian bishops appointed by William III, attacked the views of the materialists in order to defend themselves from High Church clergy who threatened their power in the Church of England (esp. pp. 30–8). This was largely a rearguard action in which they attempted to show that they were up to the task of defending the Church against heterodox views

– in spite of their own defence of toleration. She argues that the Boyle Lectures, which were instituted in this period, were ‘part of the tactical war between High and Low Church, as the latitudinarian upper clergy wanted to distance themselves from any taint of irreligion or ‘atheism’, said to be encouraged by their espousal of reason...’ (p. 59). The difficulty with Thomson’s thesis is that Whigs were both defenders and critics of the view that the soul is material. A clear case in point is the debate between John Locke and Edward Stillingfleet in the mid 1690s. (1) Why would Locke defend the possibility that the soul is material if it was so clear that doing so would undermine the Whig establishment in the Church of England? Stillingfleet was among the bishops appointed after 1688 who defended the claim that there was a mutual contract between king and people, and that one could break one’s oath when that contract was violated – as happened in the reign of James II. (2) Certainly he was worried about Socinianism and, as Thomson argues, those who attacked the doctrine of the Trinity often also denied the immateriality of the soul. But this does not mean that his debate with Locke was motivated by worries about the attacks of High Churchmen on the new order within the Church of England – especially as he had intellectual reasons to think that the doctrine of an immaterial soul provided the best defence for the Christian doctrine of an afterlife.

In any case this political analysis is dropped in Thomson’s third chapter, ‘Animal Spirits and Living Fibres’, where she turns back the clock to earlier 17th-century debates about the materiality of the soul, mostly in the period after the Restoration. While she discusses the increasing understanding of the physical basis for physiological functions traditionally ascribed to the soul or mind, she argues that ‘evidence of the way the mind is influenced by bodily states was in itself an insufficient basis for a materialistic explanation of humans’ (p. 67). What was also required was a notion of ‘active matter’ which could not only perform basic life functions, but also serve as the basis for thought and the higher functions of the soul. She argues that such a notion was supplied by Francis Glisson, a Cambridge physiologist and member of the Royal College of Physicians who argued that every organ of a living body functions by a ‘natural perception’. According to Thomson, Glisson even extended his view to develop ‘a monistic view of substance as energy’ (p. 70). The basis for a materialist conception of human beings was also developed at this time by Oxford physiologist and physician Thomas Willis by way of his doctrine of two material souls – the first a vital soul in the blood which he compared to a flame, and the second a sensitive soul which consisted of animal spirits distilled in the brain – and which he compared to light. In spite of the fact that Willis (like Glisson) subscribed to the doctrine of an immaterial soul to account for the higher intelligence of human beings, Thomson argues that ‘Willis’s work ... attracted the attention of those wanting to elaborate a [purely] material account of the mind divorced from an immaterial soul’. On her view, both Willis and Glisson developed conceptions of active matter which could account for the higher functions of the mind, and dispense with the need for an immaterial soul. Nevertheless, the dominant view which emerged during this period was that matter was passive – containing neither the basis for motion nor perception in itself. Thomson discusses in particular the reactions of the Cambridge Platonists – particularly Henry More and Ralph Cudworth – to Glisson’s claims about matter being perceptive (p. 77). She argues that religious writers such as Richard Baxter (whom Thomson wrongly identifies as a Calvinist (3)) were far more receptive to Glisson’s claims about active matter than these philosophers who held that ascribing activity to matter was the path to atheism (pp. 75–6). Like, Locke later, Baxter argued that one would be limiting the divine power by denying that God could superadd thought and perception to matter (pp. 55 & 76; cf. p. 95). However, Thomson fails to point out that while Baxter’s argument did dispense with the need for an immaterial soul, it does not really require a notion of matter as in itself active. In fact, a consensus was gradually built up during this period among most philosophers and scientists that matter, generally conceived as consisting of inert atoms, is in itself inactive. What becomes philosophically interesting and up for debate is the question what further entities one must add to the universe to account not only for thought, but also for active properties of nature such as gravitation.

Thomson’s fourth chapter, ‘Mortalists and Materialists’, deals mainly with religious debates in England in the first two decades of the 18th century. She examines a number of key defenders of materialism including Henry Layton, William Coward, John Toland, Henry Dodwell, and Anthony Collins. Following a suggestion of Justin Champion she states at the beginning of the chapter that her aim is to show how different accounts of the soul were used to justify ‘a different set of political and religious institutions’ (p. 97). However, while

the republican political aims of a figure such as John Toland are not in dispute, the interpretation of his views on the nature of matter and the soul are – as Thomson herself acknowledges. While insisting that motion is essential to matter, ‘he was wary of attributing sensation to the smallest parts of matter’ (p. 120). On the other hand, while physician William Coward’s attacks on the doctrine of the immateriality of the soul are clear enough, the way in which his views contribute to political and social institutions is not. He lashes out against those he considers religious and social fanatics such as the Quakers and Muggletonians, as well as the clergy of the established Church of England. He criticizes the factionalism of the latter while speaking out against all ‘Monopolies in Religion, as well as Trade’ (p. 108). Thomson does carefully lay out the development of Coward’s views on the materiality of the soul through his various publications – including his references back to seventeenth-century thinkers such as Hobbes and Glisson. He ‘shared Hobbes’ belief in the resurrection and last judgment, which removed the need for an immaterial soul continuing after the body’s death, partly because such notions seemed both to run counter to Scripture and to be incapable of demonstration’ (p. 110). Like Hobbes, he supports his views by careful reference to both the Old and New Testaments. While he appeals to the physiological principles of Glisson in order to establish that the notion ‘*that all substance ... has in it a principle of self-motion*’, he criticizes Glisson’s appeal to the distinction between spiritual and material substance (p. 113). Other charming views discussed in this chapter include those of Henry Dodwell, whose mortalist views were tied up with the belief that ‘only baptism by a bishop confers immortality’ (p. 127), and John Asgill, who like many American fundamentalists today, held that ‘*Man may be translated from hence into that of Eternal Life, without passing through death*’ (p. 130). It is heartening to learn that Asgill was banished from the Dublin Parliament shortly after publishing his view, and that he was generally seen as ‘Mad, an Enthusiast, an Atheist’ (p. 131). It seems that wacky views like *the rapture* were less acceptable in early 18th-century Britain than in 21st-century America.

Chapter five, ‘Journalism, Exile, and Clandestinity’, describes the transmission of English debates on the materiality of the soul to France by way of contributions to French-language journals by Huguenot exiles in the Netherlands and Britain itself. While it is well recognized that these writings played an important role in the French Enlightenment, Thomson provides a detailed account of the specific transmission of the materialistic ideas of the soul. For example, she details the contributions on this topic of Royal Society member Pierre Des Maizeaux to the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres*, the *Histoire des ouvrages des savants*, and even the Jesuit journal *Mémoires de Trévoux* (pp. 146–8). She also describes the transmission of the English debates into France by Jean LeClerc through the *Bibliothèque Choisie* (pp. 148–50). The last section of the chapter, entitled ‘Underground Passages’, includes a discussion of how the clandestine literature in France incorporated the accounts of the English debates from these Huguenot journals (pp. 155–74). Thomson discusses the clandestine manuscript *L’ame matérielle* which she dates from the mid-1720s (p. 156–9), as well as published but banned works such as Voltaire’s *Lettres anglaises* (1734) where, in his famous Letter 13 ‘On Locke’, he praises that philosopher’s hypothesis of thinking matter and contrasts it with Descartes’ claim that thinking substance must be immaterial (pp. 164–5).

In the sixth chapter, ‘Mid-Eighteenth-Century Materialism’, Thomson argues that the debates about whether matter can possess life, thought and activity provided the focus of discussions of human nature in a diverse set of writers in both France and England. Thomson is one of the world’s leading experts on the thought of La Mettrie and Diderot, and she carefully describes the development of their views on materialism from one publication to the next. She argues that in spite of the implications of the title to his notorious book *L’Homme machine*, La Mettrie is not accurately characterized as a mechanist and implies that he himself accepted the notion of an active matter. She describes in detail how his views on the materiality of the mind developed not only from the physiological ideas of other medical writers including Boerhaave, Haller, and Gaub whose lectures he attended in Leiden, but also Willis, Borelli, Hequet, and others (pp. 180–9). In order to prepare the reader for her account of the early writings of Diderot (pp. 198–204), she describes the extensive 18th-century biological work on life and reproduction with which he was fully acquainted (pp. 189–98). She explains how he struggled with the question whether sensibility and intelligence result from the organization of matter, or are inherent in its smallest parts. In this chapter, she also discusses the view of David Hartley who, in developing his materialist theory of the association of ideas took up Newton’s idea that nervous energy was transferred in an animal body through vibrations of nervous aether (pp. 204–9). The

final section of the chapter deals with the deterministic conclusions about human nature which La Mettrie and Diderot drew from their materialism (pp. 209–15). The former ends up with the view that human beings are ‘essentially antisocial and seek happiness in a selfish manner, except for a handful of exceptional individuals more or less identified with “philosophes”’ (p. 211). On the other hand, Diderot’s far more egalitarian determinism describes the ‘internal and external causes of human nature and human actions, at the intersection of physiology, sociology, and cosmology’ (pp. 214–5). By the end of this chapter I found myself wishing that Thomson’s discussions had been more narrowly focussed on the question of the activity of matter with which it opens. For example, while she does not mention the fact, it seems puzzling that Hartley explicitly states that ‘Matter is a mere passive Thing, of whose Essence it is, to be endued with a *Vis Inertiae* ...’ (*Observations on Man*, Vol. II, Pt. 2, p. 31). What exactly does this tell us about the way materialism was circumscribed in English writings, and why exactly was such a strategy not adopted in contemporary writings in France?

In her final chapter ‘Epilogue: Some Consequences’ Thomson discusses the continuing tradition of medical materialism in the later 18th and early 19th centuries in both France and Britain, and its relation to religion and to political reform. Toward the beginning of the chapter she returns to the thought of Diderot, stressing his later reflections on the human nature in the *Rêve de d’Alembert* and their connection with the vitalist medical tradition in France in the later eighteenth century. She contrasts his physiologically based materialism with that of Helvétius: Diderot opposed ‘Helvétius’ almost exclusive emphasis on education and the external factors determining normally constituted individuals’ (p. 222). In the second section of the chapter, ‘The Medical Tradition and Religion’, she discusses Joseph Priestley’s materialism and his view that the doctrine of an immaterial soul was directly connected with ‘unchristian beliefs’ (pp. 223–4). For a sincere dissenter like Priestley, who was openly Unitarian, a genuine Christian believes in the materiality of the soul. But his materialism and determinism did not become a serious problem for him until after the French Revolution when he was forced to flee to America. Thomson contrasts Priestley’s difficulties in England with the outspoken materialism of Cabanis and the other ‘Idéologues’ in France after the revolution. The fact that materialism was still politically sensitive in Britain in the early 19th century is made clear in her discussion of the furore surrounding the writings of Dr. William Lawrence, whose lectures were attended by Charles Darwin. However, as Thomson acknowledges at the end of the book, it is difficult to connect the specific political commitments of philosophers in both France and England with their materialism – apart from the general point that materialism was often related to opposition to religious dogma and institutions. She points out that while Joseph Priestley’s political views were consonant ‘with his materialism, they were determined by the situation in Britain and America, and the fact that he was part of a dissenting tradition excluded from British politics and institutions encouraged a demand for their overhaul’ (p. 233). She points out that other British radicals ‘even republicans like Richard Price, Catherine Macauley, or Thomas Paine, were far from sharing [Priestley’s] materialism and determinism’ (p. 233). In general, ‘it is difficult to draw general conclusions about the link between belief in active matter and materialistic conceptions of humans on the one hand, and radical political beliefs on the other’ (p. 234).

Thomson’s book will provide a wonderful resource for future studies of the doctrines of the soul in the 17th and 18th centuries. However, I believe that these future studies would gain from a more balanced view – explaining the development of the doctrine of an immaterial as well as a material soul. Thomson treats the former view as ‘orthodoxy’ and the latter as ‘heterodoxy’, but there is good reason to think that these views matured alongside each other, and which view was ‘orthodox’ depended a great deal on one’s own philosophical as well as religious commitments. Immaterialism has a modern history as well as materialism. Beginning with Descartes, those who defended an immaterialist conception of the soul sought to defend a scientific world view from theology in a way made difficult by those, like Hobbes, who defended materialism. As the history of Cartesianism shows us, it was often the immaterialist view of the soul which was considered religiously heterodox. Furthermore, a bit more distance on debates about the nature of the soul can give us a clearer view of the political and social issues thought to be at stake. As David Hume makes clear in a dialogue he published in 1748, most of his contemporaries believed that the doctrine of immortality of the soul – including the claim that there were rewards and punishments in an afterlife – was absolutely necessary for social order.⁽⁴⁾ Those on both sides of the debate about the materiality of the soul

who were thought to undermine this belief were considered enemies of social order. It took a far sighted philosopher and historian like Hume himself to recognize that the belief in immortality, howsoever it was defended or attacked, had nothing to do with questions of morality and good government.

Notes

1. Thomson discusses this debate on pp. 55–7. Its intellectual context is explained in detail by M. A. Stewart, ‘Stillingfleet and the way of ideas’, in *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford, 2000), pp. 245–80.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Like Thomas Tenison and John Tillotson, Stillingfleet was appointed bishop after the revolution. See Steve Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven & London, 2009), esp. pp. 405 and 421.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Baxter sought ‘a middle way’ in the ecclesiastical disputes of the period, and never entirely broke with the established church. In the *New Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Baxter, N. H. Keeble writes that in doctrine he developed ‘a mean between Calvinism and Arminianism which maintained the decree of election but rejected predestined reprobation and a limited atonement.’[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. ‘Of the Practical Consequences of Natural Religion’, Essay 11 of *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1748). This essay was later re-titled ‘Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State’. See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford, 2000), esp. 11:28, p. 129.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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