

Locke and the little finger

Locke's references to the little finger in §§17-18 strike us as odd. Why the interest in the little finger?

I think he's referring to Hobbes. Hobbes was a materialist, meaning he held that the only kinds of things that exist are material or made up of matter. Hobbes was probably commenting on Aquinas. Aquinas thought the soul was a substantial form and concluded that the soul had to be present in every part of a body.

Locke, of course, thought that personal identity was independent of both matter and substance.

1 John Locke [1689]

"Self is that conscious thinking thing, whatever substance made up of ... which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, ... [etc.]. Thus every one finds that, whilst comprehended under that consciousness, the little finger is as much a part of himself as what is most so. Upon separation of this little finger, should this consciousness go along with the little finger, and leave the rest of the body, it is evident the little finger would be the person, the same person ..."¹

2 Thomas Hobbes [1651]

"For the circumscription of a thing, is nothing else but the determination, or defining of its place; and so both the terms of the distinction are the same. And in particular, of the essence of a man, which (they say) is his soul, they affirm it, to be all of it in his little finger, and all of it in every other part (how small soever) of his body; and yet no more soul in the whole body, than in any one of those parts. Can any man think that God is served with such absurdities? And yet all this is necessary to believe, to those that will believe the existence of an incorporeal soul, separated from the body"²

3 Thomas Aquinas [1266-68]

"... if the soul were united to the body merely as its motor, we might say that it is not in each part of the body, but only in one part through which it would move the others. But since the soul is united to the body as its form, *it must necessarily be in the whole body, and in each part* thereof. For it is ... the substantial form of the body. Now the substantial form perfects

not only the whole, but each part of the whole. For since a whole consists of parts, a form of the whole which does not give existence to each of the parts of the body, is a form consisting in composition and order, such as the form of a house; and such a form is accidental. But the soul is a substantial form; and therefore it must be the form and the act, not only of the whole, but also of each part. Therefore, on the withdrawal of the soul, as we do not speak of an animal or a man unless equivocally, as we speak of a painted animal or a stone animal; so is it with the hand, the eye, the flesh and bones ...

That *it is entire in each part* thereof, may be concluded from this, ... a whole is that which is divided into parts, [and] there are three kinds of totality, corresponding to three kinds of division. There is a whole which is divided into parts of quantity, as a whole line, or a whole body. There is also a whole which is divided into logical and essential parts: as a thing defined is divided into the parts of a definition There is ... a third kind of whole which is potential, divided into virtual parts. ...

Therefore if it be asked whether the whole whiteness is in the whole surface and in each part thereof, it is necessary to distinguish. If we mean quantitative totality ... then the whole whiteness is not in each part of the surface. The same is to be said of totality of power: since the whiteness which is in the whole surface moves the sight more than the whiteness which is in a small part But if we mean totality of species and essence, then the whole whiteness is in each part of a surface.

Since, however, the soul has not quantitative totality ... the whole soul is in each part of the body, by totality of perfection and of essence, but not by totality of power. For it is not in each part of the body, with regard to each of its powers; but with regard to sight, it is in the eye; and with regard to hearing, it is in the ear; and so forth".³

¹*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) Ch. 27, §17. See §18 too.

²*Leviathan* (1651) Ch. 46, ¶ 19.

³*Summa Theologiae* (1266-68) Part 1, Question 76, Article 8. I added the italics for emphasis. I also deleted quite a bit in order to make it intelligible. I might have sacrificed some arguments in doing so.