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JOHN LOCKE AND THE *KABBALA DENUDATA*.
PRE-EXISTENCE, TRANSMIGRATION AND PERSONAL
IDENTITY

Abstract

This paper focuses on John Locke's interest in pre-existence and transmigration, which emerges in his greatest work *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* and elsewhere in his writings. It aims to show that this interest was stimulated by his reading of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala denudata*, which gave a prominent position to those theories, and the writings of the Flemish Kabbalist Francis Mercury van Helmont, a strenuous advocate of metempsychosis who collaborated with Knorr on publishing Kabbalistic texts. I argue that Locke was intrigued by their opinions for two important reasons. First of all, both Knorr and van Helmont leveraged these theories to undermine the Christian doctrines of original sin and the eternity of hell, which Locke likewise rejected. Secondly, the controversy stirred up by van Helmont's opinions brought to the fore the question of what might ensure the preservation of personal identity over time, an issue that was much discussed in the seventeenth century in connection with the two related questions of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body. Locke was particularly interested in these debates, as is shown by the *Essay*.

Keywords: *Kabbala denudata*, transmigration, consciousness, personal identity

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Introduction

Recent studies have shown that the *Kabbala denudata*, the rich anthology of Jewish esoteric texts published in two volumes in 1677 and 1684 respectively, had a significant impact on Western philosophy.¹ The work, edited by the German Hebraist and Kabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, met with a mixed reception from European scholars, provoking controversy that had far reaching effects on the continent.² It is likely that the growing body of research on this subject will lead to a better understanding of the influence exerted by the *Kabbala denudata* on seventeenth-century thinkers, thus clarifying its role as the source of new ideas that developed during the Enlightenment.

In this paper, I would like to focus on John Locke's reception of the *Kabbala denudata*, precisely on his interest in one important aspect of the Kabbalistic teaching. Broadly speaking, we may say that his attitude towards this text was far from being conciliatory. To a great extent, Locke agreed with the harsh criticism expressed by the Platonist Henry More, which represented a sort of landmark in the controversy stirred up by Knorr's work.³ Like More, Locke was suspicious of Knorr's attempt to

¹ See C. KNORR VON ROSENROTH (ed.), *Kabbala denudata, sive Doctrina Hebraeorum Transcendentalis et Metaphysica atque Theologica*, 2 vols, Sulzbach, A. Lichtenthaler 1677; Frankfurt, J. D. Zunner 1684. Classic studies on *Kabbala denudata* include G. SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah*, New York, Meridian Books 1978, pp. 416-419, *passim*; A. COUDERT, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century. The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614-1698)*, Leiden, Brill 1999; A. B. KILCHER (ed.), *Die Kabbala Denudata: Text und Kontext: Akten der 15. Tagung der Christian Knorr von Rosenroth-Gesellschaft*, «Morgen Glanz. Zeitschrift der Christian von Rosenroth Gesellschaft», XVI, 2006; M. IDEL, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, London-New York, Shalom Hartman Institute/ Continuum 2007, pp. 521-522; W. SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, *Geschichte der christlichen Kabbala. Band 3: 1660-1850*, Berlin, Verlag 2013; J.H. (YOSSI) CHAJES, *Kabbalah and the Diagrammatic Phase of the Scientific Revolution*, in R. I. COHEN, N. B. DOHRMANN, A. SHEAR, and E. REINER (eds.), *Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of David B. Ruderman*, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press; Pittsburg, University of Pittsburg Press 2014, pp. 109-123; A. M. VILENO, *A l'ombre de la kabbale. Philologie et ésotérisme au XVII^e siècle dans l'oeuvre de Knorr de Rosenroth*, Paris, Honoré Champion 2016.

² In this regard, see M. LAERKE, *Three Texts on the Kabbalah. More, Wachter, Leibniz, and the Philosophy of the Hebrews*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», XXV, 5, 2017, pp. 1011-1030; Id., *Spinozism, Kabbalism, and Idealism from Johann Georg Wachter to Moses Mendelssohn*, «Journal of Modern Philosophy», III, 1, 2021, pp. 1-20.

³ More's criticism is to be found in some writings that appeared in the first volume of the *Kabbala denudata*. In this regard, see A. COUDERT, *A Cambridge Platonist Kabbalist Nightmare*, «Journal of the History of Ideas», XXXVI, 4, 1975, pp. 633-652; VILENO, *A l'ombre de la Kabbale*, cit., pp. 90-129; G. DI BIASE, *Henry More against the Lurianic*

reconcile Christianity with the Kabbalah, which seemed to discard creationism and substance dualism. As I have shown elsewhere, the defence of the *creatio ex nihilo* and the immateriality of God built up in the fourth book of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* was reminiscent of More's criticism, which had appeared in the first volume of the *Kabbala denudata*.⁴ Moreover, Locke had another important reason for opposing this work, which More certainly did not have. Being a Platonist, More found nothing objectionable in the idea that souls pre-existed and transmigrated, one of the pillars of the Kabbalistic teaching. Knorr's anthology gave prominence to these ideas by including a number of writings from the school of Safed of the Kabbalah, particularly from the Lurianic school, where some significant developments had taken place in the theory of transmigration or *Gilgul*. These developments were harmonized with the Christian religion in the works of the Flemish alchemist and Kabbalist Francis Mercurius van Helmont, who closely collaborated with Knorr on publishing Kabbalistic writings in the last decades of the seventeenth century. The *Essay* shows that Locke's opinion on pre-existence and transmigration was negative, although he manifested a keen interest in these theories elsewhere in his writings. Victor Nuovo has provided abundant evidence of this. Locke mentioned the pre-existence and revolution of the souls, along with the rival theories traducianism and creationism, in *Adversaria theologica* 94, a list of theological topics that he compiled in one of his paper-books.⁵ Moreover, he made copious notes on the *Adumbratio*, the last text in the second volume of *Kabbala denudata*, many of which concern these beliefs.⁶ Thus Nuovo was certainly right when he suggested that Locke attributed «some intellectual value» to pre-existence and transmigration,⁷ in spite of being a mortalist. I shall try to clarify why he considered them valuable.

I would like to show that Locke was intrigued by two important aspects of these theories. First of all, both Knorr and van Helmont leveraged them to undermine the Christian doctrines of original sin and the eternity of hell, which Locke likewise rejected. Like them, he believed that these

Kabbalah. The Arguments in the Fundamenta, «Rivista di Storia della Filosofia», LXXVII, 1, 2022, pp. 19-35.

⁴ See G. DI BIASE, *God, Matter and Eternity in John Locke's Essay*, «Historia Philosophica», XXI, 2023, in print.

⁵ See BODLEIAN MS LOCKE c. 43, pp. 1-7; LOCKE, *Writings on Religion*, ed. V. Nuovo, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2002, pp. 21-33; V. NUOVO, *Christianity, Antiquity and Enlightenment, Interpretations of Locke*, Dordrecht, Springer 2011, p. 142.

⁶ See BODLEIAN MS LOCKE c. 27, pp. 75-77; the transcription and English translation of Locke's notes are to be found in V. NUOVO, *Christianity, Antiquity and Enlightenment*, cit., pp. 147-160.

⁷ Ivi, p. 143.

traditional beliefs were at odds with God's fundamental attributes, benevolence and mercy. Secondly, the controversy stirred up by van Helmont's opinions brought to the fore the question of what might ensure the preservation of personal identity over time, an issue much discussed in the seventeenth century in connection with the two related questions of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body. Locke was particularly interested in these debates, as is shown by the *Essay*.

In what follows, I shall first consider the context in which Locke's interest in the Kabbalistic theories of pre-existence and transmigration germinated, then I shall try to clarify its motives.

1. *Locke, the Kabbala denudata and transmigration*

The teachings of Rabbi Luria on *Gilgul* recorded by his foremost disciple Chajjim Vital became known in Europe through the Hebrew book *Sefer haGilgulim*, published in Frankfurt in 1684.⁸ Knorr included a Latin translation of this treatise in the second volume of the *Kabbala denudata*, in the section devoted to *pneumatica. De revolutionibus animarum*, the title he gave to this work,⁹ contained a detailed exposition of the events occurring after the Breaking of the Vessels, or first Fall: the sin committed by the totality of the souls collected in the body of Adam Protoplastes; their subsequent embodiment and series of transmigrations, according to the gravity of their individual transgressions. Many pages in *De revolutionibus* are interspersed with comments and scriptural references interpreted according to the Kabbalistic teaching, probably added by Knorr and his associate van Helmont.¹⁰ A talented physician and the son of Paracelsus' most famous disciple Johannes Baptista van Helmont, he became known in the eighties as a strenuous advocate of metempsychosis, a theory that he first illustrated in his book *Two Hundred Queries...Concerning the Revolution of the*

⁸ The book was edited by R. Meir Poppers. During a conference of rabbis of Frankfurt in 1682, a ruling was issued prohibiting the publisher R. David Gruenhaut from distributing *Sefer haGilgulim*, but the publisher did not heed the warning. In his foreword, the publisher condemned the decision to forbid the printing of the book. He supported his claim with various Kabbalah books which had been previously printed in Frankfurt with the approbation of prominent Frankfurt rabbis.

⁹ The full title is *De Revolutionibus Animarum qui in hac materia à Judeis vocatur primus. E manuscripto hant ita pridem ex Oriente ad nos perlato ex Operibus R. Jitzchak Lorjensis Germani Cabbalistarum Aquilae, latinitate donatus*, in Knorr, *Kabbala denudata*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 243-478. On this text see E. MORLOK, *De revolutionibus animarum*, «Morgen Glanz», XXIV, 2014, pp. 1-18.

¹⁰ Regarding the life and works of Francis Mercury van Helmont, see A. COUDERT, *The Impact of the Kabbala in the Seventeenth Century*, cit.

Humane Soul.¹¹ This text, published in English in 1684 – the same year as the second volume of the *Kabbala denudata* – had been written some years before, during van Helmont's stay in England at Anne Conway's house. In the introduction, van Helmont recommended another two treatises on this subject, namely *De revolutionibus animarum* and another work «elucidating the chiefest points here mentioned, but after another manner than is done in these Queries».¹² In the Latin edition of *Two Hundred Queries* (1690),¹³ this second treatise would be identified as the *Adumbratio Kabbalae Christianae*, the last text in the second volume of the *Kabbala denudata*.¹⁴ The *Adumbratio* was also published separately, given its importance as an outline of the central theses of Knorr's Christian Kabbalah: the idea of creation as an emanation of the divine infinite substance into the void space originating from the *Tzimtzum*; the identification of the Christian Messiah with Adam Kadmon, the first emanation of the Kabbalistic God; the pre-existence and revolution of the souls; the various stages of the *Tikkun*, or restoration; the idea of universal salvation or *apocatastasis*. Pre-existence and metempsychosis were advocated together as one and the same theory in ch. 7 of the *Adumbratio*,¹⁵ probably produced by Knorr in collaboration with van Helmont. Most of the arguments deployed in this chapter were also in Knorr's *Dissertation concerning the Pre-existency of Souls*, which he published in English in 1684 under the pseudonym of "Peganius";¹⁶ however,

¹¹ See [F.M. VAN HELMONT], *Two Hundred Queries moderately propounded concerning the Doctrine of the Revolution of Humane Souls, and its Conformity with the Truth of the Christian Religion*, London, R. Kettlewell 1984.

¹² *Ivi*, p. iii.

¹³ [F.M. VAN HELMONT], *De revolutione animarum humanarum; Quanta sit Istius Doctrinae Cum Veritate, Christianae Religionis Conformitas Problematum Centuriae duae Lectori modesto, modeste propositae*, in ANON, *Opuscula Philosophica; Quibus continentur Principia Philosophiae Antiquissimae & Recentissimae. Ac Philosophia Vulgaris Refutata; Quibus sub-juncta sunt C.C. Problemata de Revolutione Animarum Humanarum*, Amstelodami 1690, p. 4. Van Helmont's text is the last in this volume, which includes a work by Anne Conway.

¹⁴ The full title is *Adumbratio Kabbalae Christianae: Id est Syncatabasis hebraizans, sive brevis Applicatio doctrinae Christianae Hebraeorum Cabbalisticae ad Dogmata Novi Foederis; pro Formanda Hypothesi, ad Conversionem Judaeorum Proficua*. The *Adumbratio* was also published as a separate book in Frankfurt in 1684.

¹⁵ See *ivi*, p. 47, where it is stated that metempsychosis «includes pre-existence in itself» («Metempsychosi, quae involvit praexistentiam»).

¹⁶ [C. KORR VON ROSENROTH], *A Dissertation Concerning the Pre-existency of Souls: Wherein the state of the Question is briefly unfolded, and divers Arguments and Objections on both sides Alledged and Answered*, London, R. Kettlewell 1684. In the frontespice, the book was said to have been written in Latin some years before.

these arguments reappeared in the *Adumbratio* in a dialogue form, van Helmont's preferred form of writing.¹⁷

To summarise, the year 1684 saw the appearance of numerous books advocating pre-existence and transmigration, which were the result of a close collaboration between Knorr and van Helmont. Locke possessed all of them. He befriended van Helmont in Rotterdam in late 1686, though he was already acquainted with his alchemical theories by that time.¹⁸ As van Helmont's biographer Allison Coudert has shown, their friendship was cemented by common interests and many mutual acquaintances, particularly the Quaker Benjamin Furly and the members of the "Lantern" circle.¹⁹ Van Helmont introduced Locke to Knorr, who sent him his comments on the *Abregé* of the *Essay* «according to the teachings of the Jews and the ancient Philosophers» in 1688.²⁰ Locke owned Knorr's *Dissertation* and a great deal of books by van Helmont, including *Two Hundred Queries* and *Paradoxical discourses* (1685), which made extensive use of his notion of transmigration to explain away a number of thorny problems in Biblical exegesis.²¹ What is more important, he possessed the entire corpus of the *Kabbala denudata*, which he bound together in a single volume.²² It is uncertain when this work became part of his personal library; however, a letter he addressed to his French acquaintance Nicolas Toinard in 1679 contains a mention of the first volume, though Locke seemed to ignore the name of the translator (Knorr).²³ Another letter that Locke received

¹⁷ Following a suggestion by Vilenko, I had formerly argued that van Helmont might be the author of ch. 7. See VILENO, *A l'ombre de la Kabbale*, cit., pp. 133-135; G. DI BIASE, *The Adumbratio Kabbalae Christianae and the Problem of its Authorship*, «Bruniana & Campanelliana» XXVIII, 1, 2022, pp. 215-222. However, the reading of Knorr's *Dissertation* has led me to change my opinion. On van Helmont's use of dialogue form see COUDERT, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 59-60.

¹⁸ In 1657-58, Locke was reading the 1652 edition of J. B. van Helmont's *Ortus medicinae*, prefaced by his son Francis Mercury.

¹⁹ COUDERT, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, cit., pp. 271-307.

²⁰ C. Knorr von Rosenroth to Locke, late March or early April 1688, in J. LOCKE, *Correspondence*, ed. by E. S. de Beer, vol. 3, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1978, pp. 399-405.

²¹ See J. H. HARRISON and P. LASLETT, *The Library of John Locke*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1971², p. 205, no 2165; p. 152, no. 1416a and 1413; [F. M. VAN HELMONT], *Paradoxical discourses of F. M. van Helmont, concerning the macrocosm and microcosm, or the greater and lesser world, and their union set down in writing by J. B. And now published*, London, R. Kettlewell 1685.

²² Ivi, p. 98, no. 558 and 558a. Concerning the time in which Locke came into possession of the two volumes see NUOVO, *Christianity, Antiquity, and Enlightenment*, cit., p. 131.

²³ Locke to Nicolas Toinard, 6 June 1679, in J. LOCKE, *Correspondence*, ed. by E. S. de Beer, vol. 2, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1976, pp. 30-31.

from Damaris Cudworth, the daughter of the Platonist Ralph Cudworth, in 1684, suggested that he was well acquainted with van Helmont's opinions on transmigration by that time.²⁴ Four years later, Knorr's comments on the *Abregé* confirmed that Locke's knowledge of the Kabbalah had broadened. Knorr argued that some Jewish esoteric teachings concerning the original condition of the souls and their status at the end of the *Tikkun* might be reconciled with Locke's empiricist theory of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, despite their presupposing the existence of innate ideas. More than a criticism, this letter looked like an attempt to convince him of the soundness of Kabbalistic teachings. While in Rotterdam or later in England, where they spent together five months at Lady Masham's house from October 1692 to February 1693, Locke and van Helmont might have had many opportunities to discuss these teachings.

The earliest mention of metempsychosis in Locke's manuscripts dates back to 1672, when he cited «Transmigration» along with the rival theory «psychopannuchia» in one of his classifications of the branches of knowledge, under the heading «Theologia».²⁵ His notes on the *Adumbratio*, written between 1688 and 1693 and entitled *Dubia circa Philosophiam Orientalem*, confirm his persistent interest in this theory; however, it would be wrong to conclude that Locke believed in transmigration. Some notes entitled *Resurrectio et quae sequuntur*, which he most probably wrote in 1699 at the time when he was working on the *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, reveal that he accepted mortalism, a minor but influential heresy in Protestant Europe according to which the soul and body perish together at death, and would be resurrected together by divine miracle on Judgment day.²⁶ Thus, he could not agree with van Helmont on transmigration at the time he wrote those notes. However, Coudert has observed that a letter that Locke received from William Clarke, one of the «Helmontians», in 1694, suggested that he might not have adhered to mortalism at that time.²⁷ In the letter, Clarke complained about the criticism levelled at a pamphlet he had written in defence of van Helmont's opinions on

²⁴ Damaris Cudworth to Locke, 16 June 1684, in LOCKE, *Correspondence*, vol. 2, cit., pp. 619-620. In the letter, Damaris mentioned van Helmont's opinion that the sum of the years each soul spends to complete its 12 revolutions amounts to 1000 years.

²⁵ See BODL. MS LOCKE c. 28, f. 41v. The term «Transmigration» seems however to be a later addition to this scheme.

²⁶ The notes, centred on 1 Cor. XV, are undated. See J. LOCKE, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul to the Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians*, ed. by A. W. Wainwright, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1987, vol. 2, pp. 679-684.

²⁷ The letter is dated 1 August 1694. See LOCKE, *Correspondence*, ed. by E. S. de Beer, vol. 5, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1979, pp. 97-102; COUDERT, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century*, cit., p. 282.

transmigration, and asked Locke to write a rebuttal of that criticism, published in Oxford by a certain “J.H.” whose identity is unknown. Coudert commented that this request appeared «extraordinary in the light of modern appraisals of Locke», which agree on his accepting mortalism;²⁸ however, Clarke’s letter falls short of proving that Locke believed in transmigration. Not only did he possess J. H.’s *Refutation of Helmont’s Pernicious Error*,²⁹ but he seemed to agree with him to a certain extent, as is shown by a chapter of the second book of the *Essay* added to the second edition (1694). This chapter, the 27th, was written in mid- 1693 and contains a great number of references to pre-existence and transmigration which might be the upshot of Locke’s conversations with van Helmont in the preceding months. A detail suggests that Locke might be thinking of Luria’s teaching on transmigration, faithfully recorded in the *Kabbala denudata*. In *Essay* II.xxvii. 27 he argued,

But taking, as we ordinarily now do (in the dark concerning these Matters), the Soul of a Man, for an immaterial Substance, independent from Matter, and indifferent alike to it all, there can from the Nature of things, be no Absurdity at all, to suppose that the same Soul may, at different times be united to different Bodies, and with them make up, for that time, one Man; As well as we suppose a part of a Sheep’s Body yesterday should be a part of a Man’s Body tomorrow, and in that union make a vital part of *Meliboeus* himself as well as it did of his Ram.³⁰

The last lines recall the satire that John Dunton had made of the Kabbalah in his book *A voyage around the world* (1691), where he ridiculed Luria’s belief that human beings absorb whatever they eat, which becomes part of their material vehicle:

As great a *Coward* as I am, there may have gone I know not how many *particles of a Lyon* into my Composition, and as *small as my Body* is, my *great Grandfather* might be made out of a Whale or an Elephant. [...] I am apt to think (*between Friends*) if there be any thing in’t, that most of the *Lyoness Particles* rambled *somewhere else*, to another Branch of the Family; and that more of the *Sheep*, the gentle Lamb, or such harmless innocent Creatures *Rambled* into my Composition.³¹

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ J. H., *An Answer to Some Queries proposed by W.C. Or a Refutation of Helmont’s Pernicious Error*, Oxford, Leon. Lichfield 1694; see Harrison and Lanslett, *The Library of John Locke*, cit., no. 98, p. 73.

³⁰ LOCKE, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1975, II. xxvii. 27, p. 347.

³¹ J. DUNTON, *A voyage round the world, or, A pocket-library divided into several volumes*, London, Newcome 1691, pp. 27-29.

Other details suggest that Locke might be thinking of Knorr's and van Helmont's opinions on pre-existence and metempsychosis, but, for the moment, I shall return to J. H.'s arguments. In his *Refutation* he wrote that

If Men that live now have liv'd divers lives before, Either *they do remember* what was done in their former lives or *they do not*. If they *do not remember*, to what purpose is it for Men to be born again to suffer for Faults which they cannot recollect, or have the least knowledge that ever they were guilty of them? and how can they be hereby made sorry and Repent for their Offences, seeing upon the strictest Search they can make, they cannot tell *when, against whom, in what, nor how* they have Offended: and how shall they or others take warning by these Punishments, since they can never guess for what it is they are punished: God forbid that we should think that the great Judge of Heaven and Earth should ever establish such a senseless manner of Inflicting punishments.³²

Lack of recollections was an ancient objection against metempsychosis, often reiterated by critics of the doctrine of pre-existence in the seventeenth century. So, there was nothing original in J.H.'s attack on Clarke's pamphlet. What is interesting is that Locke raised a similar objection against pre-existence and transmigration in *Essay* II. xxvii, though in a very different form. He first argued that memory is essential to preserve our personal identity over time, since it allows us to revive our consciousness of our past deeds. Thanks to memory, we would be able at present to appropriate those actions we carried out in the past – those we were conscious of and performed voluntarily – and so be assured of being now the same, persisting self.³³ Then Locke stated that our being justly held accountable for our actions depends on sameness of consciousness, that is to say on our having at present the same awareness of them as we had when we carried them out.³⁴ After that, he claimed that God, being supremely good, would not hold us accountable for those acts we do not remember having committed.³⁵ Finally, Locke launched his attack on transmigration:

Suppose a Christian *Platonist* or *Pythagorean*, should upon God's having ended all his Works of Creation the Seventh Day, think his Soul hath existed ever since; and should imagine it has revolved in several Humane Bodies, as I once met with

³² J. H., *An answer to some queries*, cit., p. 22.

³³ LOCKE, *Essay*, cit., II.xxvii.9, p. 335.

³⁴ A comprehensive account of Locke's theory of personal identity is to be found in R. BOEKER, *Locke on Persons and Personal Identity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2021. Regarding the genesis of Locke's theory, see U. THIEL, *The early modern Subject. Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2011, pt. II.

³⁵ LOCKE, *Essay*, cit., II.xxvii.13, p. 338.

one, who was perswaded his had been the Soul of *Socrates* (how reasonably I will not dispute. This I know, that in the Post he fill'd, which was no inconsiderable one, he passed for a very rational Man, and the Press has shewn, that he wanted not Parts or Learning) would any one say, that he, being not conscious of any of *Socrates's* Actions or Thoughts, could be the same Person with *Socrates*? Let any one reflect upon himself, and conclude, that he has in himself an immaterial Spirit, which is that which thinks in him, and in the constant change of his Body keeps him the same; and is that which he calls himself: Let him also suppose it to be the same Soul, that was in *Nestor* or *Thersites*, at the Siege of *Troy*, (...) which it may have been, as well as it is now, the Soul of any other Man: But he, now having no consciousness of any of the Actions either of *Nestor* or *Thersites*, does, or can he, conceive himself the same Person with either of them? Can he be concerned in either of their Actions? Attribute them to himself, or think them his own more than the Actions of any other Man, that ever existed?³⁶

The example of the man who believed he was the reincarnation of *Socrates* – a figure particularly congenial to van Helmont³⁷ – highlights Locke's intention to mock that theory, since he represented an exception rather than the rule. Moreover, it shows that Locke substantially agreed with J. H. that transmigration made divine justice senseless. He argued that lack of recollections would prevent those transmigrating into different bodies from appropriating those actions they had performed in their earlier lives, so that they would no longer feel responsible for them. As a result, they would be unable to understand God's punishments at the Judgment day, which was absurd. In Locke's own words,

in the great Day, wherein the Secrets of all Hearts shall be laid open, it may be reasonable to think, no one shall be made to answer for what he knows nothing of; but shall receive his Doom, his Conscience accusing or excusing him.³⁸

The same argument was used against pre-existence in *Essay* II.xxvii.19, and it again mentioned *Socrates*:

to punish *Socrates* waking, for what sleeping *Socrates* thought, and waking *Socrates* was never conscious of, would be no more of Right, than to punish one Twin for what his Brother-Twin did, whereof he knew nothing, because their outsides

³⁶ Ivi, II.xxvii.14, p. 339.

³⁷ The Appendix of [F. M. VAN HELMONT], *The divine being and its attributes Philosophically demonstrated*, London, Randal Taylor 1693, pp. 233-240, contains an "extract from the last Words of the Philosopher *Socrates*, concerning the Immortality of Souls". Moreover, van Helmont's form of writing in almost all his works recalls *Socrates'* dialogic teaching.

³⁸ LOCKE, *Essay*, cit., II. xxvii.22, p. 344.

were so like, that they could not be distinguished; for such Twins have been seen.³⁹

Interestingly, «Socrates waking» and «sleeping» recall the «*homo dormiens et vigilans*» in a passage from ch. 7 of the *Adumbratio*, where Knorr and van Helmont advocated pre-existence against the objection that memory of our pre-natal life would be lost after our embodiment.⁴⁰ This again suggests that Locke might be referring to Knorr's and van Helmont's arguments in ch. 27.

To recapitulate, Locke's opinion on transmigration seems to converge with that of J. H. in that both deemed this theory unable to ensure God's justice. So, why did William Clarke believe that Locke might be his ally against J. H.? I shall try to respond to this question in the following paragraphs.

2. Pre-existence, transmigration and Locke's etherodox beliefs

Locke's theological writings show that, in his late years, he came to embrace a number of Christian heterodox beliefs concerning original sin, the eternity of hell and the resurrection of the same body. Regarding the first, Locke scholars generally agree that he rejected this doctrine due to his coming under the influence of the Socinians, who held that Adam's guilt had not changed human nature, reason, and morality.⁴¹ Locke advocated this opinion in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), where he criticised those who «would have all *Adam's* Posterity doomed to Eternal Infinite Punishment for the Transgression of *Adam*, whom Millions had never heard of, and no one had authorized to transact for him, or be his Representative».⁴² In other words, Locke believed that human propensity to evil – which he did not deny – was not the consequence of the Fall of

³⁹ Ivi, p. 342.

⁴⁰ See ANON, *Adumbratio*, p. 49, § 33.

⁴¹ Diego Lucci's book *John Locke's Christianity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2020, offers a comprehensive and detailed account of Locke's debt to Socinianism. See also V. NUOVO, *John Locke. The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2017.

⁴² J. LOCKE, *The Reasonableness of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures*, ed. by J.C. Higgins-Biddle, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1999, p. 5. Two manuscripts written by Locke before the *Reasonableness* and entitled, respectively, *Peccatum originale* (1692) and *Homo ante et post lapsum* (1693), advance some arguments that he later developed in the *Reasonableness*. See LOCKE, *Writings on Religion*, cit., pp. 229-230 and p. 231.

Adam but of environmental factors such as education.⁴³ He likewise did not consider human mortality as a punishment – another opinion he shared with the Socinians. In the introductory sections of the *Reasonableness*, he argued that Adam was not created immortal, though his position on this specific point is ambiguous because he expressed the opposite view elsewhere.⁴⁴ This ambiguity, however, is compatible with his opinion that Adam's posterity had not been punished for his sin, since death was inherent to human nature outside Paradise.

The idea that humankind as a whole had inherited Adam's guilt appeared to Locke unscriptural, illogical and utterly incompatible with God's goodness and justice. This was also his opinion about the eternity of Hell. In the *Reasonableness* he argued that, in the Scriptures, «death» was to be intended as literal termination, not as «endless torment in Hell-fire»,⁴⁵ and in *Resurrectio et quae sequuntur* he stated that the wicked would suffer annihilation after a brief but terrible torment.⁴⁶

Regarding the body in which the soul would be resurrected, Locke's heterodoxy already emerged in *Essay* II. xvii, where he stated, «We may be able without any difficulty to conceive, the same Person at the Resurrection, though in a Body not exactly in make or parts the same which he had here».⁴⁷ Later, in the *Reasonableness*, he claimed that our «frail Mortal Bodies» would be changed into «Spiritual Immortal Bodies at the Resurrection»,⁴⁸ and in *Resurrectio et quae sequuntur* he clarified that

We shall all be changed in the twinkling of an eye [...] Because this corruptible thing must put on incorruption & this mortal thing put on immortality. how? by putting off flesh and blood by an instantaneous change because [...] Flesh & blood cannot inherit the kingdom of god.⁴⁹

Clearly, Locke did not consider the traditional Christian teaching on the identity of the resurrected body as scriptural, as is confirmed by the dispute he had with Bishop Edward Stillingfleet in the years 1697-99.⁵⁰

⁴³Locke's view on this subject is clearly expressed in his writings on education. See J. LOCKE, *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, ed. J. W. Yolton and J. S. Yolton, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1989.

⁴⁴ See D. LUCCI, *John Locke's Christianity*, cit., p. 98.

⁴⁵ LOCKE, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 7.

⁴⁶ LOCKE, *Writings on Religion*, cit., p. 236.

⁴⁷ LOCKE, *Essay*, cit., II. xxvii.15, p. 340.

⁴⁸ LOCKE, *Reasonableness*, cit., pp. 115-116.

⁴⁹ LOCKE, *Writings on Religion*, cit., p. 233.

⁵⁰ See LOCKE, *Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to His Second Letter*, in ID., *Works*, 9 vols, 12th ed., London 1824, vol. 3, pp. 191-499; LUCCI, *John Locke's Christianity*, cit., p. 113.

Interestingly, the first two beliefs were shared by Knorr and van Helmont, who reconciled them with the Kabbalistic teaching. Van Helmont criticised the Christian doctrine of original sin and heternal hell in *Two hundred queries*, and Knorr did the same in his *Dissertation*. In ch. 7 of the *Adumbratio*, they claimed that it was wrong to believe that the guilt of one soul, that of Adam, «had been imputed to others», since all souls had originally transgressed though in different degrees.⁵¹ They likewise insisted that the punishment that souls had deserved for their transgressions, namely their embodiment in material vehicles, was not to be regarded merely as a sanction but as an opportunity to regain the blissful condition they had enjoyed before their fall. In contrast to Plato, who regarded the souls' embodiment as evil because it was contrary to their natural condition, the authors of the *Adumbratio* contended that neither working nor giving birth, the punishments that God had imposed on Adam and Eve, could be regarded as unnatural and, therefore, as evil. Locke certainly agreed with this, as we have seen. In the *Reasonableness*, he insisted that the «Temporary mortal life» that God had provided Adam and his posterity with was to be regarded as a «gift», not as a punishment.⁵²

Knorr and van Helmont likewise rejected the eternity of hell – a belief that seemed to be quite at odds with the Kabbalistic theory of *Gilgul*,⁵³ because the revolution of the souls ensured reward and punishment in large measure in this world. In the *Adumbratio*, they emphasized that the *Gehinnom* was a temporary punishment in the Kabbalah,⁵⁴ moreover, in his *Seder Olam*, published in 1693, van Helmont made explicit the reasons for his refusal of this doctrine:

Those who believe that the punishments of the damned will last forever without any end or termination, are completely wrong and have extremely unworthy conceptions of God, whose nature they neither know nor consider in the right way.⁵⁵

⁵¹ ANON, *Adumbratio*, cit., p. 38: «peccatum tale commissum esse à singulis, & non ab uno quodam, propter quem imputetur ceteris».

⁵² LOCKE, *Reasonableness*, cit., p. 10.

⁵³ G. SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah*, cit., p. 334.

⁵⁴ See ANON, *Adumbratio* ch. XI, § 20, p. 69: «Que omnia vobis éo magis erunt probabilia, qui in poenis istis finem admittitis (...) & aeternitatem hoc in casu delimitata illa intelligitis».

⁵⁵ [F. M. VAN HELMONT], *Seder Olam, sive Ordo Seculorum Historica Narratio Doctrinae*, s.l., 1693, p. 21, § 66: «Qui igitur putant damnatorum poenas fore perpetuandas in omnem aeternitatem absque fine aliquo aut termino, multum errant & nimis indignas habent cogitationes circa DEUM, imò DEI naturam non recte agnoscunt nec considerant».

Locke recorded this statement in some notes he made in one of his manuscripts,⁵⁶ and he certainly concurred that eternal Hell was incompatible with God's benevolence, as is confirmed by his notes in *Resurrectio et quae sequuntur*.⁵⁷

Finally, although Locke certainly did not agree with Knorr and van Helmont on the theory of vehicles, his opinion on the resurrected body somewhat converged with their idea that souls would receive a different garment at the resurrection. In the *Adumbratio*, they stated that «what was once flesh will rise again, and will be transformed into the nature of that vehicle which is appropriate for each soul».⁵⁸ To support this opinion, they cited 1 Cor.15: 51, «*omnes immutabimur*», a verse almost contiguous with the one Locke would refer to in the *Reasonableness* to advocate the non identity of the resurrected body (1 Cor: 15: 54). Commenting on that verse, Locke stated that our «frail Mortal Bodies» will be changed into «Spiritual Immortal Bodies at the Resurrection», and he talked of the «Resurrection of the dead», not of their Bodies.⁵⁹ Similarly, in the *Paraphrase*, when commenting on 1 Cor. 15: 42-50 he would insist that «flesh and blood» cannot inherit immortality.⁶⁰ He evidently agreed with the Socinians, who likewise criticised the idea that human beings would be raised in their own proper bodies; however, the fact that he manifested his rejection of that idea in *Essay* II.xxvii.15, which contains a reference to transmigration,⁶¹ suggests that he might be thinking of Knorr's and van Helmont's opinions on this subject.

Concisely, Locke shared a number of heterodox beliefs with Knorr van Helmont, although it is more likely that he became acquainted with them through the writings of the Socinians. This agreement might explain why William Clarke regarded him as a "Helmontian", and more importantly why Locke manifested a certain interest in metempsychosis. However, the *Essay* shows that he had another more important reason for this.

⁵⁶See BODLEIAN MS LOCKE c. 27, p. 268.

⁵⁷ Coudert speculates that van Helmont might have played a role in Locke's disavowal of this Christian belief in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), although she admits that Socinianism could have played a major role in this regard. See COUDERT, *The Impact of the Kabbala*, cit., p. 279.

⁵⁸ ANON, *Adumbratio*, cit., p. 50: «illud quod fuit aliquando caro resurget, & transmutabitur in naturam eius vehiculi quod cuilibet animae tum competet».

⁵⁹ LOCKE, *Reasonableness*, cit., pp. 115-116.

⁶⁰ LOCKE, *Paraphrase*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 253-255.

⁶¹ I shall consider the content of this paragraph later.

3. Pre-existence, transmigration and personal identity

I have said that Locke criticised pre-existence and transmigration in *Essay* II.xxvii on the ground that they made God's punishments senseless. However, his arguments against these theories might also be regarded as a criticism addressed to some common objections against them. One of these objections, also voiced by J. H.,⁶² was that metempsychosis made the identity of the corporeal substance totally irrelevant, which was contrary to the doctrine of the resurrection of the same body. Now, Locke did not accept this doctrine but agreed that the body played a fundamental role in making the identity of man. He insisted on this in *Essay* II.xxvii.15, where he cited the example of a prince transmigrating into the body formerly occupied by a cobbler:

But yet the Soul alone in the change of Bodies, would scarce to any one, but to him that makes the Soul the *Man*, be enough to make the same *Man*. For should the Soul of a Prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the Prince's past Life, enter and inform the Body of a Cobler as soon as deserted by his own Soul, every one sees, he would be the same Person with the Prince, accountable only for the Prince's Actions: But who would say it was the same *Man*? The Body too goes to the making the *Man*, and would, I guess, to every Body determine the *Man* in this case, wherein the Soul, with all its Princely Thoughts about it, would not make another *Man*: But he would be the same Cobler to every one besides himself. I know that in the ordinary way of speaking, the same Person, and the same *Man*, stand for one and the same thing.⁶³

J. H. was one of those who used the term «person» as synonymous with «man», as is shown by his *Refutation*. By contrast, Locke differentiated between the identity of man, which depended on the identity of both the soul and the body, and personal identity, which depended on sameness of consciousness alone. He argued that the identity of the corporeal substance was essential to the identity of man, but played no role as far as personal identity was concerned. This might be interpreted as a criticism of J. H.'s arguments; however, there was more in ch. 27 that might support this opinion. J. H. also criticised what van Helmont had written in *Two Hundred Queries* in order to ensure the identity of the body, namely, that the soul possessed a «Magnetick Vertue» which allowed it to attract the particles of its former body to itself during its revolutions.⁶⁴ He rejected this argument on the ground that the soul was immaterial and therefore could not possess such a property. By contrast, Locke made the issue of

⁶² See J. H., *An Answer to Some Queries*, cit., p. 27.

⁶³ LOCKE, *Essay*, cit, II.xxvii.15, p. 340.

⁶⁴ J. H., *An Answer to Some Queries*, cit., p. 27.

the immateriality of the soul totally irrelevant to personal identity, which in his view depended on consciousness whatever the substance to which it was united. Thus, although in *Essay* II.xxvii he stated, «I agree the more probable Opinion is, that this consciousness is annexed to, and the Affection of one individual immaterial Substance», he also insisted that «*self* is not determined by Identity or Diversity of Substance, which it cannot be sure of, but only by Identity of consciousness».⁶⁵

As a matter of fact, Locke considered the identity of substance problematic, not only as far as the material substance was concerned. The identity of the thinking substance was disputable for him, since unlike Descartes he denied that the soul always thinks. In *Essay* II. xxvii.10, he argued that the frequent interruptions our consciousness undergoes, caused by forgetfulness and sleep, might cast doubts on our being always the same thinking thing, «*i.e.* the same substance».⁶⁶ Certainly, J.H. and the other critics of transmigration would not agree on this argument. But what about Knorr and van Helmont?

According to J. H., van Helmont believed that «the *same Soul* is joyn'd to the *same Body* again, and being so united, do make up the same Person that liv'd before».⁶⁷ This, however, is not an exact description of van Helmont's (and Knorr's) opinions. In the *Dissertation*, Knorr clarified that «we must distinguish, betwixt the term [Man] largely taken, for the Soul, in what state or condition soever it be, and more strictly for the Soul united with the body made out of the earth». This statement reappears identical in the *Adumbratio*.⁶⁸ We may infer that Knorr and van Helmont believed that the identity of man depended on his soul in whatsoever stage of his life, that is to say from creation to the resurrection, whereas during earthly life his identity might be said to depend on his soul united to his body. Apparently, this opinion shielded Knorr and van Helmont from the criticism that Locke addressed to those who believed in transmigration in *Essay* II. xxvii. 6:

For if the *Identity* of Soul alone makes the same Man, and there be nothing in the Nature of Matter, why the same individual Spirit may not be united to different Bodies, it will be possible, that those Men, living in distant Ages, and of different Tempers, may have been the same Man: Which way of speaking must be from a very strange use of the Word *Man*, applied to an *Idea*, out of which Body and Shape is excluded.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ LOCKE, *Essay*, cit., II.xxvii.23 and 25, p. 345.

⁶⁶ Ivi, II.xxvii.10, p. 336.

⁶⁷ J. H., *An Answer to Some Queries*, cit., p. 26.

⁶⁸ ANON, *Adumbratio*, cit., p. 101.

⁶⁹ LOCKE, *Essay*, cit., p. 332.

Knorr and van Helmont might reply to this argument that the body too played a role in making the same man in this life. In ch. 7 of the *Adumbratio*, they emphasised that there was a close link between the soul and the body⁷⁰ – a statement Locke made note of in *Dubia*;⁷¹ however, like J. H. they did not differentiate between «person» and «man». By contrast, Locke attributed these terms a different meaning and, consequently, distinguished between the identity of man and personal identity. In his opinion, even if pre-existence and metempsychosis might ensure the identity of man in this life, they failed to ensure its persistence at the resurrection, because they could not guarantee the preservation of personal identity.⁷² He made this explicit in *Essay* II.xxvii.21:

To help us a little in this, we must consider what is meant by *Socrates*, or the same individual *Man*.

First, It must be either the same individual, immaterial, thinking Substance: In short, the same numerical Soul, and nothing else.

Secondly, Or the same Animal, without any regard to an immaterial Soul.

Thirdly, Or the same immaterial Spirit united to the same Animal.

Now take which of these Suppositions you please, it is impossible to make personal Identity to consist in any thing but consciousness; or reach any farther than that does. For by the First of them, it must be allowed possible that a Man born of different Women, and in distant times, may be the same Man. A way of speaking, which whoever admits, must allow it possible, for the same Man to be two distinct Persons, as any two that have lived in different Ages without the knowledge of one anothers Thoughts.

By the Second and Third, *Socrates* in *this Life*, and after it, cannot be the same Man any way, but by the same consciousness; and so making *Humane Identity* to consist in the same thing wherein we place *Personal Identity*, there will be no difficulty to allow the same Man to be the same Person.⁷³

The third opinion was the one entertained by Knorr and van Helmont. In answer to it Locke objected that Socrates could not be the same man in his earthly life and at the resurrection unless his consciousness was the same. Apparently, the two Kabbalists agreed on this. In the *Adumbratio*, they argued that, at the resurrection, «every memory will be preserved, and conscience will not be interrupted»;⁷⁴ however, they assumed that

⁷⁰ ANON, *Adumbratio*, cit., p. 50. This link had its origin in creation, when the vital centre of the soul had been located in a determinate point of matter by the Spirit of Nature.

⁷¹ See LOCKE, *Dubia circa Philosophiam Orientalem*, in NUOVO, *Christianity, Antiquity, and Enlightenment*, cit., p. 152.

⁷² On this point, see BOEKER, *Locke on Persons*, cit., ch.5.

⁷³ LOCKE, *Essay*, cit., II. xxvii. 21, p. 343.

⁷⁴ ANON, *Adumbratio*, cit., p. 49.

consciousness might be interrupted in this life by frequent memory gaps that, unlike those created by sleep in Locke's example, could not be filled in by the testimony of others. So, on what grounds might they support their statement?

To recapitulate, Locke believed that Knorr's and van Helmont's opinions on pre-existence and transmigration were affected by a fatal flaw, which also appeared in the arguments of their adversaries. By neglecting the distinction between the identity of man and personal identity, they all failed to recognize that human identity could not be preserved by the identity of substance, which could be cast into doubt, but only by sameness of consciousness. However, pre-existence and transmigration raised a further problem, which contributes to explaining why Locke was so interested in them. They exacerbated the issue of how personal identity might be preserved over time, multiplying consciousness interruptions.

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