Philosophers' Imprint

VOLUME 25, NO. 4
JULY 2025

Mary Shepherd's Dispositional Notion of God, Matter, and Finite Minds

Manuel Fasko

University of Basel

DOI*: 10.3998/phimp.3740*

0. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to clarify the relation between the divine mind, matter, and finite minds.[1] It has been noted in the secondary literature that Shepherd repeatedly characterizes this relation in emanationist terms (Boyle 2023: 268; LoLordo 2020: 20), such as when she mentions "outgoings" (EPEU: 189, 190, 219) or when she says that "[m]ind and matter; may be considered as having existed eternally, coming forth from him [i.e. God], living in him, and supported by him" (ERCE: 98). However, while LoLordo (2021: 241) thus, correctly I believe, speculates that mind and matter belong to God in some sense, and Boyle (2023: 267) suggests they are some sort of "constant creations," neither develop these ideas in more detail. In contrast, I spell out this relation by drawing from a distinction by Jennifer McKitrick (2003) to argue that the divine mind is best understood as functioning similarly to a bare or ungrounded disposition, while matter and finite minds are akin to grounded dispositions.[2] In other words, the divine mind, an infinite capacity[3] for consciousness (see §3), is the ultimate causal basis for matter and finite minds and is causally responsible for their existence and persistence. Matter and finite minds, in turn, are both

1. I use the following abbreviations: ERCE for Shepherd's first book *An Essay upon the Relation of Cause and Effect* (1824), EPEU for her second book from 1827, and LMSM for her paper *Lady Mary Shepherd's Metaphysics* (1832). Unless explicitly noted, italics and capitalization have been adopted and the page numbers refer to the original pagination of those works. Although I have also worked with the editions by LoLordo (EPEU, LMSM) and Garrett (ERCE).

2. It may be surprising that I use a distinction from contemporary analytic philosophy to shed light on a historical text. However, as I substantiate in more detail in §4, it is promising, in part because famous historical examples of emanationism such as Plotinus's *Enneads* or Leibniz's *Monadology* put so much emphasis on substances. This contrasts with Shepherd who has a dispositional understanding of the divine mind, matter, and finite minds, as I establish in §§1 and 3 of this paper.

3. In §4 I defend why it makes sense to use the term 'disposition' interchangeably with 'capacity' or 'power'. Also following Shepherd, who does not use the term 'disposition', I will make no difference between 'capacity', 'power', 'cause' or 'producing principle' (see ERCE: 46; Boyle 2020: 101). Thus, when I speak of a dispositional reading, I mean a reading according to which something is understood in dispositional terms, i.e., as a power or capacity.

capacities capable of causally interacting with each other, yet literally existing *in* the divine mind, in whose eternity they partake; a point that is important because Shepherd's commitment to the eternity of the capacities that are matter and finite minds has puzzled interpreters.[4]

I defend this interpretation in four steps. In the first section I argue that Shepherd has a dispositional understanding of matter and mind. That is, for Shepherd, matter and mind are capacities or powers. In the second section I defend this dispositional interpretation against the worry that it goes against Shepherd's epistemic project by committing her to a metaphysical position she refrains from taking. While it is true that my interpretation commits Shepherd to a metaphysical position that she does not explicitly endorse, I argue that this is unproblematic, particularly because the exegetical benefits (improving our understanding of Shepherd's metaphysics) outweigh the costs (potentially going against her emphasis on epistemic limitations). My interpretation is, thus, best understood as elucidating what Shepherd's views *entail*. It develops an obscure aspect of Shepherd's metaphysics, which requires us to draw well-motivated inferences at certain points.[5] This last point also holds true for the third section, where I consider Shepherd's remarks on the divine mind and argue that she endorses a dispositional understanding of the latter: For her the divine mind is an infinite capacity or power for consciousness. In the final section I analyze the relation between the capacities that are the divine mind, matter, and finite minds respectively by drawing from the previously mentioned distinction by McKitrick, thereby highlighting the important role that capacities or powers play in Shepherd's metaphysics.

4. LoLordo (2022: 29), for instance, speculates that Shepherd, for whatever reason, believes this is obvious. In distinction, on my reading, Shepherd can account for this commitment because of her understanding of the relation between the divine mind, matter, and finite minds.

5. It is worth noting that I am not the first to read Shepherd this way; similar interpretations have been defended by Boyle 2023: chap. 8 or LoLordo 2022: §4.2, and 2021: §9.7.What these interpretations have in common is that all of them try to develop Shepherd's metaphysics as much as her remarks and the limited set of known writings we have at our disposal allow for, often, by drawing such well-motivated inferences; assuming that doing so is illuminating as long as it does not contradict or conflict with explicit statements by Shepherd.

1. Shepherd on mind and matter as powers

As has been well documented, Shepherd repeatedly characterizes the mind as a "power" or "capacity" (e.g., ERCE: 166–170; EPEU: 18, 48).[6] She writes that the mind is "the power of thought and feeling" (EPEU: 40) and that "MIND is the CAPACITY OR CAUSE, for *sensation in general*" (EPEU: 155).[7] As will become evident, Shepherd thus understands the mind as a power or cause for consciousness, and she understands "sensation" as a "generic term" (EPEU: 5) used to denote "any consciousness whatever" (EPEU: 9).[8] As for sensations, they range from the sensations of "present sensible qualities" (EPEU: 136) to the sensations of passions such as "pleasure or pain" (EPEU: 66). In a reversal of Berkeley, who understands sensations as a subclass of ideas (e.g., PHK §33), Shepherd also endorses the view that the various species of ideas — such as the "IDEAS of memory, reason, imagination, expectation, &c. variously compounded" (EPEU: 142) — are a subclass of sensations. Shepherd also argues against Reid (e.g., EIP: 2.17) that perceptions do not merely result from sensation, but are themselves sensations (EPEU: 7, 24). On the other hand, she agrees with Reid that perceptions are a special kind of sensation inasmuch as they are "taken notice of by the mind" (EPEU: 9). That is, they are sensations which the mind explicitly registers and is aware of having.[9] But what does it mean for the mind to be a power, or *cause*, of these sensations?

6. See, e.g., Boyle 2020 or LoLordo forthcoming.

7. See EPEU: 48, 84, 113, 157, 163, 216, 242 etc.

8. Shepherd writes that she employs 'sensation' in the same way that Hume employs 'perception' (EPEU: 9; e.g., Hume T 1.1.1).

9. This understanding of perceptions as "second-order sensations" (Boyle 2023: 117) raises interesting questions about whether and to what degree Shepherd ought to be understood as endorsing a higher-order thought or even higher-order perception theory of consciousness. Given the reading I am proposing here, it would be particularly interesting to compare Shepherd's theory to contemporary dispositionalist higher-order thought (e.g., Carruthers 2005).

In ERCE, Shepherd argues against Hume's notion of causation as constant conjunction (e.g., T 1.3.11, EHU 5.1.5). She contends, *pace* Hume, that causation is a necessary and at least tripartite relation (ERCE: chap. 2): "*the union of two distinct natures*" that produce or create another nature (ERCE: 50). Shepherd argues that this production occurs "instantly" and "immediately" — i.e., effects do not follow causes but are "synchronous," as the effects are "included" in the causes (ERCE: 50): "Cause and Effect, might be represented … by A x B = C, therefore C *is* INCLUDED *in the* MIXTURE OF THE OBJECTS CALLED CAUSE" (ERCE: 141; cf. EPEU: 281–282).[10] While a lot more could be said about Shepherd's notion of causation,[11] the important point going forward is the following: Shepherd's claim that the mind is a cause of consciousness entails that the mind mixes with something more to produce the various kinds of sensations. One of these additional somethings, Shepherd argues, is the brain, which she calls "the exponent of the powers of the soul" (EPEU: 37) — by which she means to say that "a different action of brain is wanted for each *variety of sensation*" (ERCE: 171; cf. EPEU: 156). For instance, she suggests that there is a particular "action of the brain and the mind" which is "deemed colour" (EPEU: 95). This is not to say that a color sensation is *merely* a particular mind–brain interaction, for as will become evident later in this section, more is needed, such as the use of organs of sense. Rather, Shepherd's point in EPEU: 95 is that there is a specific interaction between brain and mind which always occurs in the (causal) production of a color sensation. Importantly, Shepherd views the brain as part of the material body, as becomes evident when she refers to the body of a human being as an "arrangement of that which [is] material" (EPEU: 400).

At first sight, this may sound as if Shepherd is committed to the view that there are different kind of metaphysical entities: mind and matter. However, it is important to note that she holds, at least as far as we know (see EPEU: 165), our body to be the "*continually exciting cause*, for the exhibition of the perception of extension and solidity on the mind in particular" (EPEU: 155). This is in line with her understanding of matter as "*the capacity of exhibiting upon a sentient nature* [i.e. a mind], *the sense of solid* EXTENSION in general" (EPEU: 244). To put it differently, matter and material bodies — and, respectively, their extension and solidity — are not understood as primary qualities inhering in a substance in a Lockean manner (e.g., *Essay* II.viii.9), but as manifestations of the cause that is matter.

According to Shepherd, then, the brain — conceived of as a material thing — is a power. Yet, supposing it is a causally co-responsible factor in the production of consciousness, the brain must be more than a power to produce the sensations of "extension and solidity" (EPEU: 155). In fact, Shepherd holds that "*material* things" (i.e., "beings" that are not minds) produce the sensation not only of "solid extension" but also of "other qualities" (EPEU: 113–114). For instance, a material object (one that is external from the perceiver's point of view) is capable of mixing with our organs of sense, with the brain, or more generally with our material bodily organization, and of giving rise to various sensations of sensible qualities (EPEU: 127):

> "Objects in relation to us, are nothing but masses of certain qualities, affecting certain of our senses; and which when independent of our senses, are *unknown* powers or qualities in nature" (ERCE: 46).

Although we do not know the qualities of external objects independent of our sense perception, the crucial point is this: We *do* know that they are also powers, according to Shepherd. We know this because we perceive them all similarly: in a "union" of "unknown, unnamed circumstances in nature, which are unperceived by the senses," as well the "organs of sense" that "mix" with them and with the mind (EPEU: 71–73).

Briefly, Shepherd characterizes mind and matter as partial causes in the production of consciousness. This dispositional understanding

10. For a more detailed treatment of this aspect of Shepherd's notion, see Landy 2020.

11. See Bolton 2019; Paoletti 2011.

of mind and matter, however, immediately gives rise to two worries.[12] The first worry is expressed by Thomas Reid, whom Shepherd clearly read (e.g., EPEU: 5–7). Reid contends that a "power […] cannot exist without a subject to which it belongs," and that it would be absurd and "shocking to every man of common understanding" to maintain that they could exist on their own (cf. EAP 1.3).[13] A key reason why Reid deems this to be absurd is that powers that exist on their own would seemingly stop existing whenever they are not manifested and then just start to exist again when they are. This would be problematic for Shepherd because she is committed to the claim that there are no things which can "BEGIN *their own existences*" (EPEU: 14)[14] and since she holds that a capacity like the mind can be "dormant" (EPEU: 378) or "suspended in sleep" (EPEU: 153). For this idea of a dormant or suspended capacity, existing on its own, may be taken to suggest that Shepherd must deem it possible that a capacity can temporarily stop existing before coming back into existence, when it is manifested.[15]

12. It has been pointed out that it also comes with a huge upshot: it allows Shepherd to give a straightforward account of mind–body interactions (Boyle 2023: 233–241; LoLordo 2022: §4.2, and 2021: §9.7) that steers clear of the so-called mind–body problem many of Shepherd's early modern predecessors face. See, for instance, Elisabeth of Bohemia's scathing criticism of Descartes (e.g., AT III 660–62, 683–85; AT IV 1–4).

13. Such worries are also found in the contemporary metaphysical discussion. In fact, the question "What Do Powers Do When They Are Not Manifested?" (Psillos 2006) is "central to the debate between Humean and anti-Humean metaphysics" (Williams 2011: 71). For a (neo-)Aristotelian solution to such problem, see Marmodoro 2010. As will become evident in §4, worries of the kind expressed by Reid or Psillos can be addressed if the relation between mind, matter, and the divine mind are considered.

14. This claim is standardly called Shepherd's 'causal principle' — although some scholars prefer the term 'causal maxim', e.g., Folescu (2022: 2) — and plays a crucial role in Shepherd's metaphysics (Bolton 2010; 2019). For more on this and for a recent discussion of Shepherd's arguments for the causal principle — including a concise overview of the existing literature — see Boyle 2023: 30–33 and 68–80.

15. LoLordo (2022: 29) does not seem to think that Shepherd faces this worry because, as mentioned, she believes that Shepherd is committed to the view that "a capacity or power is not even the kind of thing that could come into existence or go out of existence," since all capacities are eternal. But as LoLordo (2022: 29) notes, Shepherd does not say *why* capacities are eternal and speculates that Shepherd may have thought this is obvious. While it is clearly not obviously the case that capacities are eternally existing, I agree with LoLordo that Shepherd is committed to this view (and so can ultimately address this Reidian worry). However, in distinction to LoLordo I develop the idea that divine mind is needed to solve this problem and that its relations to mind and matter also offers an explanation of *why* Shepherd is committed to the view that these capacities are eternally existing (see §4).

Considering Shepherd's overall indebtedness to her early modern predecessors, one might assume that Shepherd solves this problem by endorsing the position that these powers that are matter and mind ultimately belong to a substance, i.e., are powers of a substance. Shepherd's writings, however, give virtually no indication that she is committed to the existence of substance(s) as a metaphysical entity.[16] One passage which might seem to suggest that she does hold this view is the following:

> "If for argument's sake, there should be supposed to exist one hundred square feet of empty space … that space would as the substratum, or continuous existence of which the sensations were the varieties, be the subject matter of which they were the changes" (EPEU: 387).

At first sight, it may seem as if Shepherd is calling space a "substratum" and claiming that sensations are its "varieties" — language which

16. There is no good evidence to attribute to Shepherd the view that substances exist either in the Lockean sense of a "substratum" (*Essay* I.iv.18) nor in the Leibnizian vein of a "substantial form" (e.g., AG 79). In fact, while Shepherd speaks of the "formation" of objects (e.g., ERCE: 56) or sensations (e.g., EPEU: 88), I was unable to find an instance in ERCE or EPEU of Shepherd using "form" that would suggest it could be a metaphysical entity in its own right. Moreover, note that she uses the terms 'substance(s)' relatively infrequently. There are approximately 20 instances in ERCE and in EPEU (plus LMSM) — compared to over 100 uses of "power(s)" in ERCE and 200 in EPEU (plus LMSM) — and in around half of all the instances Shepherd quotes from Berkeley's *Principles* (EPEU: 92, 196, 211–215), Lawrence's *Lectures* (ERCE: 152–162), or Fearn's *Anti-Tooke* (LMSM: 706). Even more tellingly, Shepherd also often forgoes using the term when answering these philosophers. This is in stark contrast to someone like Leibniz, who considers "the notion of substance to be one of the keys to the true philosophy" (AG 286) and accordingly employs the term frequently.

seems close enough to the view that space is the underlying entity in which sensations inhere. On closer examination, however, it becomes evident that this claim is part of a *hypothetical* train of thought — which is obvious from the introductory clause ("if for argument's sake") as well as her choice of the conditional tense. Shepherd even argues, in the next sentence, that empty space, which is "*nothing*" and can therefore never "be rendered a *something*," ought to be replaced by "that mysterious *something* capable of feeling" (EPEU: 387) — i.e., a mind. And if this is done, not only would the sensations become its varieties, but "this substance would exist as the capacity of an individual mind" (EPEU: 388). As LoLordo (2021: 241) points out, this sounds as if Shepherd is "identifying substance with capacity," where the capacity has a bearer (i.e., a mind). But considering that Shepherd argues that the mind is a "simple capacity for general sensation" (EPEU: 15), this move would not commit her to the view that substances play a metaphysically important role; rather, it suggests that the mind is capacity that plays a role akin to a substance.

While this further substantiates the dispositional reading of mind and matter as powers, it does not help to address the Reidian worry because it is still unclear what happens if the powers that are matter and mind are not manifested. As I argue in §§3–4, Shepherd's writings — particularly her understanding of the divine mind and its relation to matter and finite minds — provide the resources to address this kind of worry. Before I can address this issue, however, it is prerequisite to discuss the second worry this dispositional understanding of matter and mind gives rise to: this interpretation may seem problematic because it runs counter to Shepherd's epistemic project.[17] This issue will be addressed in the next section.

2. The metaphysics of mind and matter and our epistemic limitations

In this section I address the previously mentioned worry that my dispositional interpretation of matter and minds as powers or capacities commits Shepherd to a metaphysical view on which she is deliberately non-committal. After all, Shepherd explicitly writes (EPEU: 244) that we do not know "the real essences of matter and mind." In the following, I demonstrate that passages such as this are not as epistemically restrictive as they might appear at first sight. In fact, they are compatible with Shepherd's holding that we can gain some fundamental knowledge about matter, and particularly, mind. I, thus, argue that we are justified in drawing inferences that go beyond the text because they are well motivated by the latter and, crucially, do not conflict with Shepherd's epistemic project — or with claims she makes elsewhere in her writings.

Before I turn to EPEU: 244 in more detail, it is important to note that Shepherd, in this passage and others like it, often qualifies the epistemically restrictive statement. Shortly after the "real essences" claim (EPEU: 244), she writes that we "cannot conceive the nature of any essence not in our experience." Given that Shepherd has an idiosyncratic use of punctuation (see LoLordo 2020: xiii), this can be read as saying that our experience cannot get us these essences, but something else might. It remains unclear, however, what this something could be. Similarly, she says that "the *positive* nature and essence of unperceived beings cannot be known" (EPEU: 242). But it is unclear in the context of this passage whether matter and, particularly, mind are such beings, because this statement refers to external objects. She also writes that the mind "strives to find, if possible, the very essences of things" but is "for ever disappointed at not meeting with, those essences" (LMSM: 708). However, on a closer look her point is that the mind tries to do that from "the bare comparison of the relations of its ideas" and she then says that we are "philosophers enough to know it is impossible to do so." But this leaves open the possibility that there is some other way that might get us to those essences.

Another thing to note concerning the statement in EPEU: 244, and others like it, is that despite what she says there, Shepherd is explicitly speaking about the essence of mind. For instance, she writes that "the mind is a continually existing essence, capacity, or power in general"

17. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer as well as the editor of this journal for their critical feedback that helped me to further develop this point.

(EPEU: 120) and she even claims that she has found "*the one* essence [of mind], viz. consciousness" (LMSM: 708, my emphasis). Thus, Shepherd seemingly believes that her claim that we do not know the "real essence" of mind is compatible with knowing that the mind is essentially a capacity for consciousness. This, in turn raises the question of what Shepherd actually means, when she makes this "real essence" claim.

It is hard to determine what Shepherd understands by "real essence" because this is the only time in her known works that she explicitly uses the term. But it seems likely that Shepherd has Locke in mind. The latter famously states in his *Essay* (III.iii.15) that real essences "may be taken for the very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is. And thus the real internal, but generally in Substances, unknown Constitution of Things, whereon their discoverable Qualities depend."[18] It is clear from the previous section, however, that Shepherd does not endorse the existence of substance. Moreover, it is unclear in Shepherd's case whether all existing things have an internal constitution because Shepherd never speaks of such when it comes to matter and mind, but only does so in relation to external objects (e.g., ERCE: 116–118; EPEU: 309–312).[19] Shepherd is also less epistemically pessimistic than Locke when it comes to discovering these internal constitutions. She believes that Locke "renders the difficulty something greater than it need be" (ERCE: 117) because "the senses […] are considered capable of nearly detecting the similarity of internal constitutions" (ERCE: 117).

Thus, there are several ways in which Shepherd's usage of "real essence" departs from Locke. But she can still use it in a broadly Lockean sense to refer to the "very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is" (*Essay* III.iii.15). This is *prima facie* consistent with the epistemically restrictive claims about essences she makes elsewhere (e.g., EPEU: 242; LMSM: 708) and her claim that the mind is essentially a capacity for consciousness. For if we understand her use of "real essence" in this broadly Lockean sense, the claim in EPEU: 244 boils down to saying the following: While we know the mind is essentially a capacity for consciousness, we do not know what makes it such. The mind to us is a "mysterious eternal power of feeling" (EPEU: 376), because we cannot know why it is capable of doing what it does and because we never directly access this capacity but only experience its manifestations. That is, we do not immediately access the cause that is the mind but only its effects, the consciousness it causally co-produces. This distinguishes the mind from our sensations, whose "*very essences*" we know since we have immediate and unfiltered access to them "in our experience" (EPEU: 244).

Briefly put, while Shepherd believes there are aspects of the mind which to know are beyond our epistemic limitations, such as knowing why the mind is what it is and can do what it does, she also holds that mind is essentially dispositional. With this, we can turn to the case of matter, which is more complex because while we know matter to be a capacity to produce the sensation of solid extension on a mind (see EPEU: 244), it is unlikely that matter is nothing but that. After all, if matter causally interacts with matter, it will not produce the sensation of solid extension in a *mind*. Thus, it is unsurprising that Shepherd never makes similar claims about the essence of the "*unknown being matter*" (EPEU: 165). But the reason for this silence is not that she believes matter to be something else than a capacity. Rather, this is explained by the main goals of EPEU: Shepherd wants to provide a "proof of the existence of matter, and of an external universe" (EPEU: xi) — or,

18. This is likely, given that at ERCE: 158n Shepherd refers to *Essay* IV.6.8–9, where Locke explicitly discusses the issue of real essences. This note, moreover, is one of the few other places in which Shepherd at least comes close to using the term; see also ERCE: 116n, where she approvingly cites Locke as saying that "every thing" has a real constitution. For more on Shepherd and Locke, see Boyle 2023: 80–82; LoLordo 2020: 8–9.

19. Note that the existence of an internal constitution is *prima facie* compatible with my dispositional reading of external objects. Based on passages such as ERCE: 46, Fantl (2016) and Boyle (2023: 88–89), for instance, argue that external objects are bundles of causal powers. Shepherd's emphasis on the importance of internal constitutions for what an external object is then bottoms out to say that it matters *how* the bundle of powers that are an external object is structured. For a critical discussion of the bundle theory, see Landy (2023).

to be even more precise, to prove its external, independent, and continuous existence (EPEU: chap. 1–3) — and to "distinctly show the limit of 'what we know of body'" (EPEIU: xv). But EPEU is also an inquiry into the "nature […] of matter, and of an external universe" (EPEU: xi) and into the "*nature* and *reality* of external existence" (EPEU: xii). This leads Shepherd — despite refraining from explicitly commenting on the essence of matter in the way she does with the mind — to make positive claims about matter. Crucially, as the previously cited passage (EPEU: 244), and the first section more generally, have shown, these positive claims are made in dispositional terms.

To put it differently, the reason why Shepherd does not make similar claims about the dispositional essence of matter, compared to the case of the mind, is her epistemic focus in EPEU, which rests on the limits of our knowledge of (material) bodies. This focus is combined with the high likelihood that matter must also exhibit a capacity different from producing the sensation of solid extension in a mind because in causal interactions which feature only matter, there is no mind in which such a sensation could be produced. Thus, we cannot know whether the capacity to produce such sensations really is the "very being" of matter "whereby it is, what it is" (*Essay* III.iii.15). However, crucially, Shepherd's refraining from explicitly saying that matter is essentially dispositional in this sense is not the same as her believing that matter needs to be something else than a power or capacity. On the contrary, she clearly characterizes matter in dispositional terms and is committed to the view that this capacity exists continuously as well as externally and independently of a given finite mind (EPEU: chap. 1–3).

In sum, when Shepherd says (EPEU: 244) that we do not know the "real essences of matter and mind," this bottoms out as her saying that we only have limited understanding of what it is that makes the capacities that are matter and mind what they are and why they can do some of the things they do. Crucially, however, this is different from claiming that matter and mind are *not* essentially capacities or powers. In the case of the mind, Shepherd explicitly makes statements to the contrary in saying that it is essentially a capacity for consciousness. While she is more restrained in the case of matter, her hesitancy does not stem from doubt concerning its dispositional nature. Rather, Shepherd is more cautious when it comes to matter because her stated goal is to find our epistemic limits when it comes to our knowledge of body, and it would go clearly beyond our epistemic limitations to claim that matter is *only* a capacity to produce the sensation of solid extension in a mind. Thus, this section shows that it is possible to respect Shepherd's epistemic project and nonetheless attribute a dispositional understanding of matter and mind to her — even where this requires us to draw inferences that go beyond her explicit remarks.

3. The divine mind

It is clear that God plays an important role for Shepherd (see EPEU: Essay 10–13); she also implicitly draws attention to our epistemic limitations when it comes to God. For instance, she calls the Deity a "mysterious being" and writes that God's essence is "mysterious" to us (EPEU: 400). Thus, at first sight, discussing God gives rise to the same worry discussed in the previous section: it may seem to run counter to Shepherd's epistemic project. This holds even more so in light of Shepherd's claim that, even though it contains "no inconsistency in its endeavour," the mind can be "overpowered by its own exertion" when it contemplates "mysterious" subjects, particularly ones that involve infinity (LMSM: 708). As will become evident in §4, however, the exegetical benefits (improving our understanding of Shepherd's metaphysics) outweigh the costs (potentially going against her emphasis on epistemic limitations): for clarifying, as far as possible, Shepherd's understanding of God and the relation between the Deity, matter, and mind does solve the Reidian worry and helps to explain metaphysical commitments of Shepherd such as the eternity of matter and mind (see EPEU: 392).[20]

20. This worry can be further alleviated when considering that Shepherd herself repeatedly engages in metaphysical speculation about God and other theological issues such as the afterlife (e.g., EPEU: Essays 10–13). In this context she does not shy away from taking metaphysical positions that seem *prima facie* to go beyond our epistemic limitations (see also note 24). For example,

Even though Shepherd is cautious when it comes to God's essence, she clearly holds that God is immaterial (EPEU: Essay 11) and that God has a mind. For instance, she writes of "the mind and consciousness of Deity" (EPEU: 389). She also refers to God as a "mind" or "essence" (e.g., ERCE: 98; EPEU: 354, 389, 397). This may be taken to suggest that these terms are used interchangeably because she even seems to identify God with a mind, for example when she writes of God as "the universal mind" (EPEU: 390) or "the eternal mind" (EPEU: 354). However, in light of the danger that our own mind becomes overwhelmed when considering a subject such as God (see LMSM: 708), I will focus on the divine mind, about which we can know quite a bit according to Shepherd, and confine myself to spelling out its relation to matter and finite minds.

A first parallel that has been noted (LoLordo 2020: 20n) which Shepherd sees between the divine and finite minds is that both exist in space. But while Shepherd suggests that finite minds need a body to do so, she indicates that the divine mind could immediately be present in space (see LMSM: 699). In fact, Shepherd goes as far as to suggest that the divine mind could "inhere" in space which, at first sight, gives rise to similar worries as Newton's remarks on the relation of God and space (see Connolly 2015). However, addressing these worries or discussing the relation between space and God is beyond the scope of this paper.[21] Rather, the important thing to note is that Shepherd, in placing both *in* space, draws an interesting parallel between the divine and finite minds, thus giving further weight to the question of whether the divine mind is a mind in the same sense as finite minds, which are capacities or powers for consciousness. In other words, can 'mind' be applied to God and creatures *univocally*? This question is particularly pressing given the centuries-old debate about the so-called problem of divine analogy, which concerns the sense(s) in which we can attribute anything to God.[22]

Shepherd does not explicitly deal with the problem of divine analogy, but her remarks strongly suggest that 'mind' can be univocally applied to God as well as to finite creatures. Indeed, Shepherd emphasizes that God is the "ONE UNCAUSED ESSENCE" (ERCE: 96)—i.e., only God is an "underived Being" (EPEU: 397), while finite creatures are "minor beings" or "*derived* essences" (EPEU: 396). But this difference has no bearing on their respective minds. For the difference between "essential, and dependent being" (i.e., between God and humans among others) is a difference "between the small circle allotted to the exercise of each animal sensorium, and that which is as unconfounded as infinity" (EPEU: 398–399). That is, Shepherd's emphasis rests on the gradual difference between the field of application (i.e., the "exercise") of finite minds, which are merely "allotted a small circle," and their divine counterpart, which does not have boundaries. But, crucially, Shepherd does not suggest that there is a difference between their respective minds or capacities for consciousness. To put it differently, both have a fundamentally similar capacity for consciousness; but while God's mind is infinite and unlimited, finite minds such as the human mind are constrained by and require interaction with the body it is united with or its immediate surroundings.

That there is no fundamental difference between the divine and finite minds such as humans minds can be further substantiated by the fact that Shepherd, when discussing whether motion or rest is the "natural state of matter" (EPEU: 370), speaks of God as a "cause in action like in kind to that which I know of, but different in degree, and

Boyle (2023: 255) draws attention to Shepherd's view that the universe is infinite (see EPEU: 371) neither of which (i.e., infinity and the universe) we can experience, nor does there seem to be a straightforward process of reasoning that does not include a belief in God that could prove that.

21. It is worth noting, however, that Shepherd seemingly describes space in dispositional terms (LMSM: 701–703) shortly after making the claim about the divine and finite minds existing in space (LMSM: 699). This suggests that space could also be a capacity or power, and so if the divine mind were to (metaphysically) depend on space, this would only mean that there is another more fundamental level of capacities or powers. Yet, note, it could also be the case that the divine and space as dispositions are co-dependent and equally fundamental; even if space is eternal (EPEU: 392), it cannot exist before the divine mind because the latter is eternal as well (EPEU: 399).

22. For more on this point, see Williams (2011) and Ashworth & D'Ettore (2021).

which may account for the origin of all motion" (EPEU: 371), where the other causes she knows of are minds whose wills can "direct" motion (EPEU: 366).[23]

Shepherd also emphasizes that God created organs (such as the brain) to allow for the "finite perception" of "qualities like in kind, but not in degree" (EPEU: 400–401) to the qualities God perceives. In that context (i.e., EPEU: Essay 12), she also argues that what sets God's mind and the divine perceptions apart is that neither is in need of a body for their manifestation or occurrence (EPEU: 401). Shepherd holds that only "*derived* essences […] require organs in relation to surrounding matter, to keep up or alter their perceptions" (EPEU: 396–397). However, the fact that God does not need a body does not entail that the divine mind is of a different kind.[24] Rather, this difference seems to be connected to the divine infinity, or "unbounded essence" (EPEU: 371), which makes a body superfluous, while living beings (because of their finiteness) require it. This is suggested, for instance, when Shepherd describes the bodily organs as something that not only allow us to have sensations, but that also "circumscribed" the mind (EPEU: 398); or when she calls a mind united to a body a "*sphere of limited consciousness*" (EPEU: 265).

Apart from divine consciousness not requiring a body to arise, there is another important respect in which the divine mind and its perceptions differ from finite ones. Consider the following passage:

> "Now, in the Eternal Essence, *which began not*, in whom must have resided the original capacities for all qualities, there must have essentially existed not only mind or a capacity to feel, but that coalescence of qualities which must have formed his magnificent and innumerable perceptions" (EPEU: 398).

The first thing to note in this passage is that Shepherd refers to the divine mind as a "capacity to feel"—a term she also uses to refer to finite minds (e.g., EPEU: 396). Secondly, Shepherd implies that God does not have a "train of sensations" (EPEU: 92) like humans with a before and an after (e.g., EPEU: 153, 311; Boyle 2020: 107); rather, all perceptions are simultaneously available to the divine mind and are perceived at once. As she states, only God is "universal, and eternal, and necessary, in the comprehension of all possible qualities" (EPEU: 402).

Let us sum up the important points: Shepherd's remarks suggest that the divine mind is an infinite capacity or power for consciousness. Yet, in distinction to the capacity of consciousness that is the mind of finite beings such as humans, this divine mind does not require a body to cause consciousness, and there is an innumerable amount of simultaneously existing sensations instead of a coming and going of particular sensations. Crucially, these differences do not entail that the divine mind is of a fundamentally different kind from finite minds such as those of humans.

4. The relation between the divine mind, matter, and finite minds

While the previous sections clarified and defended a dispositional understanding of the divine mind, matter, and finite minds, this section finally spells out their relation. The starting point is, again, one of Shepherd's most explicit statements on this relation: "[M]ind and matter; may be considered as having existed eternally, coming forth from him, living in him, and supported by him" (ERCE: 98). I begin by using the dispositional interpretation defended in §1 to show what it means to say that mind and matter "live" in the divine mind, before analyzing Shepherd's understanding of the claims that mind and matter "come forth" and are "supported by" the divine mind. Finally, I argue that discerning this relation also sheds light on why these capacities are

23. For a discussion on how this, and human agency more generally, works, see Daoust (2022).

24. Consider also that Shepherd's commitment to and interpretation of the *imago-dei* thesis (i.e., that humans are created after the image of God (Gen. 1, 26)) clearly suggest a commitment to a difference in degree and not in kind—at least when it comes to the divine mind and its human counterparts (see Essay 10). For more on Shepherd's understanding of this thesis, see Fasko (2023).

eternal, which in turn allows Shepherd to address the Reidian worry (see §1).

The first thing to note about Shepherd's point that matter and mind are "living in" (i.e., existing in) the divine mind is that Shepherd takes the *'in'* very seriously. After all, Shepherd holds that we know the divine mind to exist *in* space — as do matter and mind — (see §3) and even that the former requires "infinite space for his residence" (EPEU: 391). Thus, one might worry how something material (i.e., matter) can live *in* something immaterial such as the divine mind. More generally, how can the "material world" (EPEU: 112) exist *in* the *im*material mind of the Deity? This worry dissolves, however, if we follow the dispositional reading defended here, which entails that the divine mind, matter, and finite minds ultimately are the same kind of metaphysical entities: capacities or powers. Matter and finite minds may play different causal roles in the production of consciousness, given that the body is the "*continually exciting cause*, for the exhibition of the perception of extension and solidity on the mind in particular" and the mind the "CAPACITY OR CAUSE, for *sensation in general*" (EPEU: 155) — and so it makes sense to distinguish them. However, ultimately, they are the same kind of metaphysical entity: a capacity or cause. While the capacity that is matter is "termed" material, the one that is the mind is "termed *im*material" (EPEU: 113–114), but as Boyle (2020: 101) aptly puts it, these terms are merely "labels" for these capacities and do not mark a metaphysically significant distinction. But how can this relation between the divine mind (i.e., an infinite power) and the capacities that are matter and finite minds which live *in* the divine mind and come forth from it and are supported by it, best be spelled out?[25]

I mentioned in the introduction that Shepherd often uses emanationist language when describing this relation. For instance, she repeatedly describes finite beings as "outgoings" that come "forth" from God (EPEU: 189, 190, 219) and calls "animate" and "inanimate nature" (i.e., living beings with minds and matter) a divine "emanation" (EPEU: 190). In what follows, I explain what Shepherd means by such remarks and how she conceives of the relation between the divine mind, matter, and finite minds by drawing from Jennifer McKitrick's (2003) distinction between bare or ungrounded and grounded dispositions.

At first sight, it might seem surprising to use this anachronistic distinction to clarify Shepherd's position. However, as noted in the introduction, I believe that the distinction is better suited to shed light on Shepherd's views compared to, for example, going back to Plotinus's *Enneads* or Leibniz's *Monadology*. After all, substance is important for these thinkers, also in this context, and so there is a *prima facie* challenge as to how much they can be used to elucidate what Shepherd thinks, given that substance plays no role in her metaphysics. McKitrick, on the other hand, endorses an understanding of dispositions which — despite her only applying it to properties and not to matter or mind (e.g., McKitrick 2018: chap. 1) — maps nicely onto Shepherd's conception of capacity or power.

McKitrick (2018: 2) accepts several "Marks of Dispositionality" (with some modifications that need not detain us here). According to these, a disposition such as fragility "has some characteristic manifestation M" (McKitrick 2018: 2), e.g., easily breaking when thrown to the ground. This tracks Shepherd's notion of mind as a capacity for consciousness and matter as a capacity to produce the sensation of solid extension in a mind. Furthermore, it is a mark of dispositionality that "a circumstance C will trigger manifestation M" and that manifestation M does not need to occur for something to possess this disposition

25. Shepherd's dispositional understanding of finite minds, matter, and the divine mind may also help to explain why Shepherd does not share the worries about Spinozism common among her contemporaries (see LoLordo 2020: 20; Boyle 2023: 268), even though she seems to endorse the position that "God is not distinct from the world" (LoLordo 2020: 20). For this understanding allows her to circumvent the problematic aspect of Spinoza's position: From a theistical perspective, the crucial problem with Spinoza's view is that his substance monism seemingly leads to a material notion of God (see Hübner 2019, who argues that there is a solution for human minds, at least). Shepherd on the dispositional reading, however, can not only ground the world in God or the divine mind, but she can also give room to God or the divine mind in the world via an omnipresence in space (see Fasko and West 2025) without the danger of thereby rendering the Deity into a material being.

(McKitrick 2018: 2). This fits Shepherd's position that the capacities that are mind and matter are not always manifested, and that they are 'triggered' in specific circumstances. For instance, the capacity to produce the sensation of solid extension in a mind, that is matter, needs a causal interaction between it and a mind.[26]

Furthermore, McKitrick's (2003: 349–530) distinction between two types of disposition in light of their causal hierarchies aligns with the distinction that Shepherd draws between the underived being that is God — and that either includes the divine mind or is identical to it — and the derived beings that are finite minds (and matter) (see §3). While based or grounded dispositions have a "distinct causal basis" (McKitrick 2003: 249), the ungrounded or bare disposition does not (McKitrick 2003: 250). That is, only an ungrounded or bare disposition is its "own causal basis" (McKitrick 2018: 133) and as such is "fundamental [and] irreducible" (McKitrick 2018: 153). This parallels Shepherd's understanding of God as "uncaused" (ERCE: 96); she calls the Deity "THE GREAT FIRST CAUSE" (ERCE: 119) "who began not to be" (EPEU: 219), and says God is the "beginner and director of motion, matter, mind, and consciousness" (EPEU: 401) to whom "all changes must finally be pushed back" (EPEU: 189). Additionally, according to McKitrick (2018: 132), this causal basis for a grounded disposition can "be either dispositional or non-dispositional." This helps to cover the fact that the "mysterious" essence of God, for all we know, might be non-dispositional while we know the divine mind to be a capacity.

There is, however, one aspect that needs to be modified in order to apply the notion of a bare disposition to Shepherd's understanding of the divine mind and do it justice. McKitrick (2018: 132) holds that a bare disposition is a causal basis that "causally explains the manifestation [of a grounded disposition] when it occurs." In other words, the ungrounded disposition, as an irreducible and fundamental causal basis, is "relevant to the manifestation of the [based] disposition[s]" (McKitrick 2003: 353). In Shepherd's case, this cannot mean that the divine mind is causally active any time the capacity that is matter or mind are 'manifested' themselves and, for example, consciousness is produced. On the contrary, Shepherd is adamant that God is *not* "an active spirit" which raises "ideas in us, at our board, at our toilet table" (EPEU: 303).[27] Thus, God can only be relevant to the manifestation of the capacities that are matter and finite minds inasmuch as the Deity is their "beginner" (EPEU: 401), i.e., created them.

Matter and finite minds, then, are "outgoings" (EPEU: 189, 190, 219) that come "forth" from God (ERCE: 98) in the sense that the latter is responsible for their creation, thereby laying the causal *sine qua non* for the capacities that are matter and finite minds so that they can causally interact with each other and manifest themselves, which does not require any active divine causal inference. In that sense they are 'out' of God, or rather the divine mind. That is, they are based dispositions that are distinct from the bare disposition that is the divine mind; or as Shepherd puts it, they can be "considered as [being] apart from him [i.e. God]" while they must "be regarded as containing in [their] degree, some portion of [their] celestial origin" (EPEU: 402). To put it differently, matter and finite minds share their dispositional nature with the divine mind and, crucially, are *based* in it. That is, despite being able to causally interact on their own, once they are created, they

26. There are two further conditions which are more focused on the relation between language and metaphysics and thus are not of interest for my current purpose.

27. See also ERCE: 119–120; EPEU: 46, 218. Boyle (2023: 268), at first sight, comes close to ascribing the non-desired position to Shepherd when she describes mind and matter as "constant creations" by God. Such an understanding is, however, also compatible with conservationism where matter and mind are kept in existence in virtue of God's upholding them through divine causal activity. It seems clear, in any case, that Shepherd does not endorse a strict version of occasionalism in the vein of Malebranche, according to which God is the only efficient cause (see McDonough 2008: §2 for more on the difference between conservationism and occasionalism). However, since there are more moderate versions of occasionalism available (see Lee 2020), and considering the important role that God plays in her metaphysics, it would require a more thorough examination to answer the question of whether she is an occasionalist of some sort. I thank Peter West for pressing me on this point.

are still *in* the divine mind, which ensures their persistence over time.[28] As Shepherd puts it, they nonetheless 'live' in God (see ERCE: 98). In fact, the capacities that are matter and finite minds do so "eternally" (ERCE: 98). They "originally resided" (EPEU: 189) in some form in the divine mind before God decided to put them "forth" (ERCE: 98) as "outgoings." For instance, they could have existed in the divine mind as 'dormant' capacities (see EPEU: 378) that never manifested, before coming "forth" from God as "outgoings", which leads them to being capable of manifesting themselves. Thus, the reason Shepherd holds that the capacities that are matter and finite minds are eternal is not, as LoLordo (2022: 29) speculates, that she thinks this is "obvious." Rather, this commitment follows from Shepherd's understanding of the relation between the divine mind, matter, and finite minds and the idea that the latter two, in virtue of being *in* the divine mind, partake in the eternity of said mind.

With this understanding in place — which, importantly, includes appreciating the role of the divine mind in guaranteeing the eternal persistence of matter and finite minds — it is finally possible to address the previously discussed worry (§1), e.g., articulated by Reid (EAP 1.3): It seems absurd that powers can exist on their own or "free-floating," as Boyle (2023: 234) puts it. For according to the interpretation proposed here, the capacities that are matter and finite minds neither exist on their own nor float free of anything. On the contrary, they are based in the divine mind, which can ensure their persistence even when they are "dormant" (EPEU: 378), as when the capacity that is the mind is "suspended in sleep" (EPEU: 153). In that regard, they are similar to sensations, in that they are "ready to appear upon any *irregular call* of any power" (EPEU: 16), as Shepherd puts it in the latter case.

In other words, the divine mind is the subject to which mind and matter belong. However, since the latter is also understood in dispositional terms, the Reidian worry just transfers to the next level, as it were, to the question of whether there is a subject to which the infinite power that is the divine mind belongs. There are two answers that can be given here on Shepherd's behalf, both of which suffice to address the worry. First, Shepherd might say 'Yes' to this question and point to the divine essence in which the divine mind is based in some sense — and which is eternally existing and ensures that divine mind is not 'free-floating'. Second, Shepherd might say 'No' to the question but argue that a transfer of the Reidian worry to the divine mind is misguided even if the latter is a 'free-floating' power. If someone like Reid agrees, which they arguably would, that God — who is identical with a divine mind in this case — can exist on its own, they conceded the most important point. For Shepherd can then say that someone like Reid is just wrong in thinking that God or the divine mind is a substance and, in failing to acknowledge its dispositional nature, they also wrongly conclude that a power could ever exist on its own. While this may hold true for finite powers, it is not true for the infinite power that is the divine mind (i.e., God), in the case of which Shepherd can say that is far from "absurd" that it can exist in its own.[29]

28. In that sense, matter and finite minds are *akin* to properties of the divine mind, although in a different sense than the divine attributes such as "wisdom and benevolence," which God used in the creation of finite beings (EPEU: 189; for more on divine creation, see Boyle (forthcoming)). But given that Shepherd says nothing that would preclude understanding these divine attributes in dispositional terms as well, their existence just adds another level to this dispositional story. But it would be worth clarifying in further research how exactly these attributes relate to matter and finite minds and how their existence in the divine mind differs from the latter's. This is especially so because there might be even more levels of dispositions. For instance, there could be another level of dispositions which concerns the properties of matter and finite minds. Also, Shepherd suggests that a finite mind could "inhere" in a material body (LMSM: 699), which might mean that there is a based disposition (i.e., the finite mind), which is based in another based dispositions (i.e., a material body) which is based in the bare disposition that is the divine mind. A consideration of the relation between mind and body, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

29. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point. Also note that Shepherd is committed to the idea that the power or capacity that is the divine mind is "ever-present" (LMSM: 708; EPEU: 218), i.e., always manifested. Thus, Shepherd can even reject Psillos's question, what powers do when they are not manifested as misguided when applied to the divine mind because the latter is always manifested. Additionally, understanding the divine mind as the bare disposition of everything solves the regress worry since the infinite power that is the divine mind is fundamental (see Psillos 2006: 141–143).

5. Conclusion

The primary goal of this paper has been to clarify Shepherd's understanding of the hitherto little considered relation between the divine mind, matter, and finite minds. In order to achieve this, I had, first, to clarify Shepherd's understanding of matter and mind as capacities (§1). Next, I defended this dispositional reading against the worry that it goes against Shepherd's epistemic project in showing that the reason that she does not explicitly endorse this metaphysical position, at least in the case of matter, is not that she does not think it to be true. Rather, her silence results from the epistemic aims she has concerning matter in EPEU (§2). In §3, I introduced Shepherd's dispositional understanding of the divine mind as an infinite capacity for consciousness. In the last section I have drawn from McKitrick's distinction between bare or ungrounded (i.e., the divine mind) and based dispositions (i.e., matter and finite minds) to shed light on the emanationist picture that Shepherd's remarks on this relation draw. When Shepherd says that "[m]ind and matter; may be considered as having existed eternally, coming forth from him, living in him, and supported by him" (ERCE: 98), this is best understood as a claim that the capacities that are mind and matter are created by God and that they eternally exist *in* the capacity that is the divine mind, which ensures their persistence over time. The last point is crucial because it allows Shepherd to address the worry that matter and finite minds are free-floating powers, which seems absurd, as Reid puts it. Thus, using McKitrick's distinction allowed me to make sense of Shepherd's emanationist remarks, which have been acknowledged by scholars such as Boyle and LoLordo, but never developed in more detail. In distinction to the latter, moreover, I was also able to offer an explanation for the eternity of the capacities that are matter and mind.[30] In doing so, I further strengthened the case for a dispositionalist interpretation of the divine mind, matter, and finite minds — for even though it may go beyond Shepherd's explicit commitments at points, this interpretation is in line with these commitments and offers a deeper insight into her metaphysics and the central role that capacities or powers play in it.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the editor of this journal and the anonymous referees for their constructive and insightful criticisms. I am also indebted to the participants of TEMPO 2022 and the Seminar for Early Modern Philosophy at Yale in April 2023 for their valuable feedback. Similarly, I had productive discussions about aspects of this paper with Clara Carus as well as David Landy, and I owe a debt to Antonio LoLordo's work for inspiring this research. I also want to express my gratitude to Deborah Boyle, Jelscha Schmid, Markus Wild, and Peter West who all read previous drafts and instrumentally helped in improving it. Finally, I am grateful to the Swiss National Science Foundation (https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/206598), whose grant allowed me to finish this work.

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Thus, from today's point of view, Shepherd can be understood to endorse an anti-Humean metaphysics and to believe that ungrounded powers or dispositions are possible. But note that her metaphysics even goes beyond contemporary pandispositionalism (i.e., the view that *all* properties are dispositions; see Bird 2016: 343) because matter and mind are understood in dispositional terms as well.

30. It is worth noting that a further upshot of this dispositional understanding of the divine mind, matter, and finite minds — which to develop is beyond the scope of my investigation — is that it would allow Shepherd to give a straightforward account of how divine interaction with the world works; as, for example, in the case of miracles which are "interferences of God as a cause" (ERCE: 79; EPEU: 329). There is no metaphysical tension between the immaterial mind of God and the material world because all of these constituents are the same kind of metaphysical entity: capacities or powers. Another more general upshot of this interpretation is that it gives a metaphysical underpinning to Shepherd's notion of causation more generally; it fits well with this notion and particularly the importance of mixing. After all, it seems obvious that mixtures between apparently different 'things' are possible if all of the ingredients are fundamentally of the same kind.

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