

Dealing With the Logic of Substance in the Philosophy of John Locke

Rev. Fr. Dr. Jude A. Onuoha

Directorate of General Studies, Federal University of Technology Owerri, Imo State

**Corresponding Authors: Dr. Jude A. Onuoha, Directorate of General Studies, Federal University of Technology Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. Email: fatheronoha@yahoo.co.uk, Obinnaobiagwu71@gmail.com*

INTRODUCTION

The word "substance" derives from the Latin words *sub* (under) *stans* (standing). Thus the word literally means "standing under", or "that which stands under". In ancient and medieval philosophy, substance means that which constitutes the specific nature of a thing (Bradley 2002:98). In stressing on the importance of the Categories as put forward by Aristotle, Jude A. notes that the "categories relate to each other with the first of them all Substance being unique among all...other nine categories that follow suit" (Jude, 2013:61). In this sense it is synonymous with the word essence, and it is that in virtue of which a thing is what it is, as distinct from other things or from its qualities. Thus Aristotle distinguished between substance and accident. While substance constitutes the very nature or essence of a thing, accident represents any of its qualities which is not essential to its nature, e.g., color, size, height. This however is different from its meaning in modern science. Substance, in modern science, is the stuff of which a thing is made, the material it is composed of.

Commentators have suggested at least three distinct ways of understanding what Locke meant when he spoke of substance. According to Jonathan Bennett, Locke's conception of substance is merely relational; substance is that which supports qualities and nothing more can be said. On this interpretation, Locke's substance in general consists of "bare particulars" which do not themselves have properties, hence no positive content is (nor could it be) included in our idea of it (Edwin, 1994:34). Peter Alexander rejects this view. He maintains that Locke's ontology includes two ultimate, irreducible kinds of substance: material and immaterial. When Locke speaks of substance in general, what he has in mind is one

of these two kinds of stuff. Alexander has little to say about the nature of the latter (beyond suggesting that Locke may have held perceptivity to be its defining characteristic), but argues that material substance, for Locke, is essentially solid stuff of which all material things are composed. This is the substance as *general essences* interpretation. It stands in contrast to the third main interpretation of Locke's view: substance as *real essences*. This has been defended by Nicholas Jolley, and hinted at by other scholars like Michael Ayers, R. S. Woolhouse. The real essences interpretation claims that when Locke speaks of the real essence of a thing, he has in mind its substratum (Dennet, 1998:21). On this view, 'real essence' and 'substratum' differ in intension but not extension. The two ideas are not equivalent, but in Locke's mind they pick out the same thing.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUBSTANCE

A "substance" has certain characteristics. It is durable, separable, and identical. A substance as "durable" means that it persists over time. It endures. It may come into existence, or cease to exist (as in Aristotle), or it may be uncreated or indestructible (as in Plato, Descartes, Spinoza or Leibniz), but either way, it has an extended existence in time. A substance as "separable" means that its existence is not dependent on other things. It exists independently, and it can be separated from other things that exist. A substance as "identical" means that it has an identity, in which it is the same thing as itself, or in which it has an identity as the member of a certain kind -- the same as it endures over time, or as it is separated from other things.

ACCIDENT AS OPPOSE TO SUBSTANCE

As opposed to accident, substance is anything which exists in itself, any individual thing which

exists on its own. Accident, however, does not exist on its own, but always in a substance. Color, for example, does not exist on its own or in itself but always in something other than itself and it makes no difference to the nature of the substance in which it exists. Corresponding to substance and accident, there are two kinds of changes, according to Aristotle, namely, substantial change and accidental change. A substantial change is the kind of change which involves the transformation of the very substance of the thing that changes. A typical example of such a change is “generation or corruption” (Crawson 2016:55). In either case there is a substantial change involving the substance of the being that undergoes the change. When for example a piece of paper is burnt and it becomes ashes, there is a substantial change. Similarly when a body decays and becomes dust, there is also a substantial change – from flesh to dust. In either case, there is continuity, that is, there is an element which perdures through the change (Billy 2013:44), an element which undergoes the substantial change, the element which was formerly paper but which has now become ashes. This is matter (later, in the middle ages, the Aristotelian scholastic philosophers called it Prime Matter but Aristotle himself did not describe it with this term), which formerly had the form of paper but gave it up and received a new substantial form, i.e., that of ashes.

PHILOSOPHERS VIEW ON SUBSTANCE

In Aristotle’s philosophy substance has two meanings. In the first meaning substance is whatever exists on its own while its opposite, accident, is whatever cannot exist on its own but can only in here in other things. The examples given above (color, size, and height) are contrasted in this sense with substance. Color cannot exist on its own, for example; so it is not a substance but an accident. The second meaning of the word has already been explained above. It is that which constitutes the very nature (essence) of a thing, and which distinguishes it from other things. Aristotle, accordingly, distinguishes between a substantial change and an accidental change.

The former is a change in the very nature of a thing. If a paper is burnt and it changes to ashes, the change in question here is a substantial change since it affects the nature of the paper. But if red ink were poured on a paper it would undergo an accidental change that is a change in color which does not affect the nature of the paper, for

it still remains paper in spite of the change in its color.

In the modern period, Descartes defined substance as “an existent which requires nothing but itself in order to exist”. The implication of this definition is that God is the only substance there is, since it is only God that does not require any other being other than Him in order to exist. It was Spinoza who later worked out the full implication of this Cartesian definition of substance. Descartes himself did not. Instead he went on to postulate three kinds of substances, namely, God, the human mind, and matter. Spinoza worked out the full implication of Descartes’ definition of substance in his book *Ethics*, where he tells us that there is only one substance, and this is God or Nature. Thus, for Spinoza, God, Nature and substance are three different names for the same reality. It is through these two attributes that we know it. All things are modifications of this substance and are parts of it. Spinoza’s philosophy, based as it is on this notion of substance, is thoroughly pantheistic.

Leibnitz conceived substance in atomic form, that is, as the most basic constitutive element of all things. In his *Monadology* he defines monad as “a simple substance”. Thus, all things, according to Leibnitz, are made of substances called monads. They are the smallest units with which all things are composed. They are indivisible. In fact they are spiritual entities which are the principles of force and activity in the universe. Each monad is self-contained, without link with any other monad. Each of them is the subject of several predicates. Leibnitz therefore implies that all things are ultimately spiritual since the substances with which they are composed are spiritual entities. Leibnitz is thus an idealist.

When we look at things, according to Locke, what we see are actually qualities-color, height, size, etc. But we know that qualities cannot exist on their own; they must be existing in something which supports them. This is how we come to form the idea of substance. Even though we do not see substance yet we know that the qualities we perceive must be coming from something which supports them. We cannot see substance, according to Locke, nor can we even know it. We only assume its reality as that, which underlies or supports the qualities we perceive, then we cannot know it and there is no need to postulate it. Thus, according to Berkeley, there is no material

substance because we do not perceive it. But Berkeley goes on to assert the existence of spiritual substances which are spirits. How do we know that spirits (or souls) exist since we do not see them? Berkeley says we know about the existence of our own spirit by intuition while we know about the existence of other spirits by inference. From the actions and behavior of other people we can infer that such actions or behavior emanate from spirits like ours.

Neither Locke nor Berkeley is a consistent empiricist. Indeed Locke's material substance which can neither be perceived nor known but simply postulated as underlying or supporting the qualities we perceived is inconsistent with his empiricist position. Berkeley's spiritual substance suffers from the same defect, for the existence of spiritual substances is also inconsistent with the empiricist principle that all knowledge comes from sense-perception. It was David Hume who brought empiricism to its logical conclusion. Accordingly, Hume rejects both the material substance of Locke and the spiritual substance of Berkeley as inconsistent with the empiricist principle.

Kant's "thing-in-itself", as distinct from thing-as-it-appears-to-us, looks very much like Locke's substance. Just as Locke's substance is imperceptible and unknowable so is Kant's thing-in-itself. Just as Locke's substance is inconsistent with his empiricist principle, so is Kant's thing-in-itself inconsistent with his Copernican revolution in which he tells us that we can only see and know what the mind (our mind) has restricted for us. The world we can see and can know is the world of sense-perception, the phenomenal world which has been restricted for us by our mind. There is clearly no room here for postulating anything-in-itself (the noumenon) which is outside the restructuring capacity of the mind and consequently beyond the scope of our knowledge.

The British neo-Hegelian, John Mc Taggart tells us in his *The Nature of Existence* that whatever exists is a substance, and that all substances are united in one comprehensive substance, which is the universe. The universe is the all-embracing substance, the sum-total of all substances. But the universe is not material. On the contrary, it is a spiritual substance, and there are no material substances at all except in appearance. In reality only spiritual substances exist. Mc Taggart is thus clearly an idealist, a neo-Hegelian idealist.

The concept of substance thus varies with various philosophers, depending on the schools to which they belong. While some see substance as whatever exists others see it as the core of any existing reality, the essence of a thing.

LOGIC OF SUBSTANCE IN PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN LOCKE

Locke attempts here an important distinction between two different kinds of qualities in order to answer the question of how ideas are related to objects. He terms these qualities primary and secondary. Primary qualities are those that really do exist in the bodies themselves. Thus our ideas, caused by primary qualities, resemble exactly those qualities that belong inseparably to the object. The snowball looks round and is round, appears to be moving and is moving. Secondary qualities, on the other hand, produce ideas in our mind that have no exact counterpart in the object. We have the idea of cold when we have no exact counterpart in the object. We have the idea of cold when we touch the snowball and the idea white when we see it. But there is no whiteness or coldness in the snowball; what is in the snowball is the quality, the power to create in us the ideas of cold and white. Primary qualities, then, refer to solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number, or qualities which belong to the object. Secondary qualities, such as colors, sounds, tastes, and odors, do not belong to or constitute bodies except as powers to produce these ideas in us.

The importance of Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities is that through it he sought to distinguish between appearance and reality. Locke did not invent this distinction. Democritus had long ago suggested something similar when he said that colorless atoms are the basic reality and that color, tastes and odors are the results of particular organization of these atoms. Descartes also separated secondary qualities from the basic substance he called extension. Locke's distinction reflected his interest in the new physics and the influence of the judicious Mr. Newton's incomparable book upon his thought. Newton explained the appearance of white as the motions of invisible minute particles. Reality then is found not in whiteness, which is only an effect but in the motion of something, which is the cause. His discussion of primary and secondary qualities assumed throughout that there was something that could possess these qualities and this he called substance.

As regards the question of Substance, Locke dealt critically from what he regarded as a "common-sense" point of view. How can we have ideas of qualities without supposing that there is something, some substance, in which these qualities subsist? If we ask what has shape or color, we answer something solid and extended. Solid and extended are primary qualities, and if we ask in what they subsist, Locke answers substance. However inevitable the idea of substance may be to common sense, Locke was unable to describe it with precision, admitting that "if anyone will examine himself concerning his notion of pure substance in general, he will find he has no other idea of it at all, but only a supposition of he knows not what support of such qualities which are capable of producing simple ideas in us"(Anderson, 2016:21). Still Locke saw in the concept of substance the explanation of sensation, saying that sensation is caused by substance. Similarly, it is substance that contains the powers that give regularity and consistency to our ideas. Moreover it is substance. Locke held, that constitutes the object of sensitive knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Locke was impelled by the simple logic of the matter. If there is motion there must be something that moves; qualities cannot float around without something that holds them together. We have ideas of matter and of thinking but "we shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or not." But if there is thinking, there must be something that thinks. We also have an idea of God, which, like the idea of substance in general, is not clear and distinct. Yet, "if we examine the idea we have of the incomprehensible Supreme Being, we shall find that we come by it in the

same way, and that the complex ideas we have both of God and separate spirits are made up of the simple ideas that we receive from reflection." The idea of God, as the idea of substance, is inferred from other simple ideas and is the product not of immediate observation but of demonstration. But the idea of substance, being "something we know not what," does raise for Locke the question of just how far our knowledge extends and how must validity it has.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Allan, D.J., *the Philosophy of Aristotle*, (2nd.Ed) New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- [2] Anderson, J. F., *Metaphysics in the Past Century and the Effects of Meta-Ideology of Philosophers on substance*, Austria: Gartenschon Buck
- [3] Beck, L.J., *The Metaphysics of Descartes*, Oxon: Clarendon Press, 1967.
- [4] Bradely, K., *Understanding the Essential Readings in Aristotle*, New York: Mcgrill Press.
- [5] Crawson, V., *The principles of Substance and the Question of Identity*, Holland: Brotty Press.
- [6] Dennett A., *Frontiers within the Philosophical Academia on Substance*, Kentucky: Denettison.
- [7] Onuoha, A. J., *Specifics in Epistemology*, Owerri: EeHeh Versatile Publishers
- [8] Locke, J., *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, New York: Dover Publication, 1959.
- [9] Omoregbe J.I, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction*, Joja Educational Research and Publishers, Ltd.1990.
- [10] Stumpf, S.E., *Philosophy: History And Problems*, McGraw-Hill. Inc, 1971.
- [11] Edwin M., *Locke's Philosophy of Body*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Citation: Rev. Fr. Dr. Jude A. Onuoha, "Dealing With the Logic of Substance in the Philosophy of John Locke", *Research Journal of Library and Information Science*, 3(3), 2019, pp.6-9

Copyright: © 2019 Rev. Fr. Dr. Jude A. Onuoha. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.