

## LOCKE'S AGNOSTICISM OF SUBSTANCE AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN FAITH

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of substance varies with various philosophers, depending on the school of thought. While the materialists would develop a materialistic concept of substance, the idealist would definitely develop a spiritual or idealistic concept of substance. For the thorough going empiricist, since substance is not something that can be seen or touched, one would expect that he would deny the existence of such a thing. This paper analyses concept of substance in the philosophy of John Locke: first, a study of Locke's concept of substance as the substratum to qualities is undertaken, then as general essences and finally as real essences. This is followed by a criticism of his concepts of substance.*

### **Introduction**

During the Modern Period, there was the emergence of an intense interest in the problem of substance. Descartes (cited by Omoregbe, 1996) defined substance as that which exists requiring nothing else. As such, a substance is that which exists on its own. He proposed three kinds of substances: God, the human mind and matter. Spinoza worked out the implications of this definition by Descartes. He concludes that the only substance is God, since it is only God that requires no other being than itself to exist. Whatever name Descartes gives to the three substances postulated, Spinoza (cited by Omoregbe, 1996) argues that they are all the same names for God. The totality of reality, he observes has two attributes: matter and spirit. All things are modifications and parts of this one reality: matter and spirit. In Spinoza, philosophy suffers degeneration into pantheism. Leibniz understood substance in an atomic form. Everything he argues is constituted by *monads*. He defines *monad* as a simple substance – the smallest units of which all things are made. They are self-contained (without link with other monads) and spiritual entities; and as such, since they constitute everything, then all realities are spiritual. These positions on substance were preparing the way for the discourse of Locke on the idea of substance. This paper explores the concept of substance in the philosophy of John Locke.

### ***The man John Locke***

John Locke walked through the stage of England's history at a time that was particularly turbulent, and he was personally associated with some of the dramatic episodes, despite possessing a rather quiet and retiring character (Lowe, 1995). Locke's first works were written at Oxford, but were not published during his life time. These works are *Two Tracts on Government* and *Essays on the Law of Nature*. In the views of Ashcraft (1988) and Laslett (1988), Locke is the suspected author of *A Letter from a Person of Quality to his Friend in the Country*. This letter infuriated the government and may have led to his departure to France in 1675 (Iloyd, 1995). He is also the author of *Essays Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises of Government*. He also published a couple of minor works in his later years: *Some considerations on the Lowering of interest and Raising the Value of Money* (1668), *The Second Letter for Toleration* (1691), *Third Letter for Toleration* (1692), *Some thoughts on Education* (1693), and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). He was not just a writer; he played a prominent role in the political life of his country. He was Commissioner for Appeals, Commissioner for Trade. He influenced the repeal of the Acts for the Regulation of Printing in 1695, and also the re-coinage of the debased English currency in the 1690's. Before his death, Locke was not only an international renowned intellectual figure, but also he had moved in the most influential political circles of England.

Born in August 29, 1632, Locke was the eldest child of a respectable Somersetshire Puritan family. His father was a small landowner, a lawyer and a captain of a volunteer regiment in the parliamentary army (Matthew, 1997). In spite of his family's moderate income, Locke received an excellent education, first at Westminster School, where he received a through grounding in Latin and Greek, then in 1652, he went to Christ Church, Oxford. His association with the University of Oxford lasted for more than thirty years. He received his B.A degree in 1656, and graduated as Master of Arts in 1658. After his graduation, he remained at Oxford where he taught Greek, served as a reader in rhetoric and finally censor of moral philosophy in 1664 (Iloyd, 1995). He retained this position until he was expelled in 1684 at the instigation of Charles II, the reason being that Locke was involved with a political group that were opposed to the royal policies of the time (Lowe, 1995). His reading of Descartes, Newton, Boyle, Thomas Sydenham and the founding of the Royal Society at Oxford ignited Locke's interest in science, and medicine precisely (Hutchins, 1980).

Locke's family had a very strong protestant background, accounting for the continuous influx of religion into his philosophy. He was baptized into the Church of England. He had a very vast and long-lasting interest in religious matters: it never waned but continued until the day of his death. He had a great interest in biblical scholarship, Patristics and Anglican theology (Matthew, 1997). After retiring from public life, Locke occupied himself with biblical studies and wrote a commentary on the Epistles of St Paul. Locke died in October 28, 1704, while Lady Masham was reading the Psalms to him. He was buried in the churchyard of the parish church at High Laver near Oats, where his tomb can still be seen.

### *Locke's agnosticism about the existence of substance*

The most widely known of Locke's characterization of the idea of substance in the *Essays*, which has played into the parameters of critiques ever since the criticism of his concept of substance by Berkeley is his idea of substance as "something I know not what". Locke (1999), unveil his agnosticism about substance when he wrote,

The idea then we have, to which we give the general name substance, being nothing but the supposed, but unknown, support of those qualities we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that support *substantia*; which, according to the true import of the word, is, in plain English, standing under or upholding. (279).

There were times when Locke's agnosticism sounded as an implicit attack on the rationality of the Christian understanding of God. There can be no doubt that Locke was quite seemingly sarcastic in some places, as in his analogy of the Indian who claimed that the Earth was supported by an elephant, the elephant by a tortoise, and the tortoise by 'something, I know not what' or when he reduces it to children talk. For those who used the idea of substance as though they were aware of what they saying, Locke (1999) writes,

It helps not our ignorance to feign a knowledge where we have none, by making a noise with sounds, without clear and distinct significations. Names made at pleasure, neither alter the nature of things, nor make us understand them, but as they are signs of and stand as determined ideas. And I desire those who lay so much stress on the sound of these two syllables, substance, to consider whether applying it, as they do, to the

infinite, incomprehensible God, to finite spirits, and to body, it be in the same sense; whether it stands for the same idea, when each of those three different beings are called substances. (278).

This was seen by professional clergy men like Stillingfleet, as an attempt by Locke to compromise the orthodox Christian faith, trinitarianism in particular, since it understood divine triunity, according to the traditional conception, as three persons existing in one substance. Stillingfleet (1987) accused Locke of almost discarding substance out of the reasonable part of the world. This accusation would be tantamount to heresy since it called into question the doctrine of the Trinity; and understandably, Locke wouldn't want to be labelled a heretic. And so he plays in-between maintaining his agnosticism about substance and saving his ideas from being considered a heresy. In his letter to Stillingfleet, Locke (1967) writes:

I do not understand what is almost to discard Substance out of the reasonable part of the World. If your Lordship means by it, That I deny or doubt that there is in the World any such Thing as Substance, that your Lordship will acquit me of, when your Lordship looks again into that Chapter, which you have cited more than once, where your Lordship will find these Words.

According to Jordan (2012), Locke, in his text, acknowledges that he does not think we can have a clear idea of substance in general, but insists that this is not the same as denying its existence. To justify his position, Locke (1823) sees a striking similarity between his own concept of substance as "something we posit because we can't conceive of qualities subsisting alone", and a statement of bishop Stillingfleet about such subsistence being 'repugnant' to us. Here, he wants to show that he has the same reason for believing in substance as Stillingfleet does:

What now can be more consonant to itself, than what your Lordship and I have said in these two Passages is consonant one to another? Whereupon, my Lord, give me leave, I beseech you, to boast to the World, that what I have said concerning our general Idea of Substance, and the way we come by it, has the Honour to be confirmed by your Lordships Authority. (445).

He then goes ahead, with the intention of undermining the argument of Bishop Stillingfleet even though he sounds polite and respectful; he quotes the statement of his Lordship,

It is a repugnancy to our first conceptions of things, that *Modes* or *Accidents* should subsist by themselves, and therefore the *Rational Idea of Substance* is one of the first, and most natural ideas in our minds (Stillingfleet 1987, 236).

In spite of the criticism of scholars of Locke's concept of substance, Locke was still remarkably consistent in his remarks about the existence of substance in general. When pressed by Stillingfleet, he repeatedly agrees that we are unable to conceive of qualities subsisting of them. Not minding the inexplicitness of Locke, many commentators like Jordan (2012) have construed his letter to Stillingfleet as an argument to the effect that the existence of a substratum is logically necessary, even though he never made any categorical statement in this regard. In his letter to Stillingfleet, Locke (1697) wrote: "the *being of Substance* is not shaken by what I have said" (33). In another text he says, "having everywhere affirmed and built upon it, That a *Man* is a Substance, I cannot be supposed to question or doubt of the *being of Substance*, till I can question or doubt of my own *being*" (32). As regards spirits, he writes: "It cannot be doubted but there are distinct Species of separate Spirits, of which yet we have no distinct Ideas at all: It cannot be questioned but Spirits have ways of communicating their thoughts, and yet we have no Idea of it at all" (33). From what Locke (1999) says in the *Essays* about spirits, it shows that he had no doubt of the being of spiritual substances,

We have no certain information, so much as of the Existence of other Spirits, but by revelation. Angels of all sorts are naturally beyond our discovery: And all those intelligences, whereof 'tis likely there are more Orders than of corporeal Substances, are Things, whereof our natural Faculties give us no certain account at all. (548).

In Locke's *Essays*, we need to distinguish between agnosticism about the *being* of substance from agnosticism about our *idea* of substance. In his letter to Stillingfleet, Locke (1697) was clear on this matter:

The other thing laid to my Charge, is, as if I took the being of Substance to be doubtful, or render'd it of by the imperfect and ill-grounded Idea I have given of it. To which I beg leave to say, that I ground not the being but the Idea of Substance, on our accustoming ourselves to suppose some

Substratum; for 'tis of the Idea alone I speak there, and not of the being of Substance. (32).

The argument of Locke is thus agnosticism about the *idea* of substance and not about the *being* of substance.

### *Substance as a complex idea*

Locke (1697) describes substance in his letter to Stillingfleet thus,

... I never said, that the general idea of substance comes by sensation and reflection: Or, that it is a simple idea of sensation or reflection, tho' it be ultimately founded on them; for it is a complex idea, made up of general idea of something, or being, with the relation of a support to accidents. (35).

How then is the complex idea of substance formed? Distinct from simple ideas, Locke (1999) writes that complex ideas are born when our minds puts together or compound simple ideas that are received.

Ideas thus made up of several simple ones put together, I call complex; such as are beauty, gratitude, man, an army, the universe; which, though complicated of various simple ideas, or complex ideas made up of simple ones, yet are, when the mind pleases, considered each by itself, as one entire thing, and signified by one name. (147).

In the process of putting simple ideas together, the mind exerts its power on the simple ideas received. In the words of Locke (1999), "...so it exerts several acts of its own, whereby out of its simple ideas, as the material and foundations of the rest, the others are framed" (146). In this process of the mind exerting its power on simple ideas, the complex idea of substance is formed. In relation to God and Spirits, which Locke (cited by Stumpf, 2000) categorizes as substance, he says, "if we examine the idea we have of the incomprehensible 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 we received from reflection" (256). As the mind exerts its power on simple ideas it generates complex idea of substance.

The concept of substance in Locke has been understood severally by scholars and commentators. These understandings can be grouped into three. Benneth (1980), reveals Locke's description of substance as the substratum of qualities, which is also known as the bare particulars interpretation or the traditional understanding

of substance. The second by Alexander (1985), is the concept of substance as general essences, comprising of both material and immaterial substances. Thirdly, there is the concept of substance by Jolly (1984) as real essences. All these concepts of substance reveal the dimensions of the Lockean concept of substance.

### *Substance as a substratum to qualities*

Under the traditional interpretation, Locke looks at substance from a common sense approach. In this approach, substance is understood purely in relational terms. Through sensation and reflection, we come to have ideas of various qualities, both primary and secondary. For Jordan (2012), since we cannot conceive of such qualities existing on their own, we suppose that there must be something in which they inhere - a thing which itself neither is a quality, nor has any essential qualities. Its nature is exhausted by its function; substance is merely that in which qualities inhere. It is in this regard that Moreland (2001) sees substance as things to which qualities are tied. The ideas of qualities are understood to subsist in a substance. For instance, according to Stumpf (2000), if we were to ask what has shape or colour, we answer something solid and extended. Solid and extended are primary qualities, and if we ask in what they subsist, Lock would answer, substance. Qualities cannot simply float around without something that holds them together. In the selected texts below from his *Essays and Letters*, Locke (1999) speaks of substance as such:

We have no such clear Idea [of substance] at all, and therefore signify nothing by the word Substance, but only an uncertain supposition of we know not what; (i.e. of something whereof we have no particular distinct positive) Idea, which we take to be the substratum, or support, of those Ideas we do know. (548).

our Idea of Substance, is equally obscure ... in both [cases of material as well as immaterial substance]; it is but a supposed, I know not what, to support those Ideas, we call Accidents. (546).

According to Stumpf (2000), Locke was impelled by the simple logic of matter in his interpretation of substance as substratum. If there is motion, there must be something that moves. If there is thinking, then there must be something that thinks.

During Locke's first degree at Oxford, Gibson (1917) avers that he came into contact with scholasticism and there is no doubt that his thinking is shaped by it, even though some dimensions of his philosophy are anti-scholastic. He went

through regular courses in Aristotelian Logic, Metaphysics, Physics and Ethics. The impact of scholasticism plays out in his concept of substance as a substratum. It reveals so much of Aristotle's influence, and sometimes, reminiscent of Aristotle himself. The comparison of texts from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Locke's *Essays* would provide more light. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes:

That is why someone might actually be puzzled about whether walking, flourishing, or sitting signifies a being; for none of these either is in its own right or is capable of being separated from substance, but it is more true that the walking or sitting or flourishing thing is a being -- if indeed it is a being. This latter type of thing is apparently more of a being because it has some definite subject -- the substance and the particular -- which is discerned in such a predication; for this subject is implied in speaking of the good or sitting thing. Clearly, then, it is because of substance that each of these things is also a being, so that what is in the primary way, what is not something, but is without qualification a being, is substance (20).

In his *Essays*, Locke (1999) also writes:

The Mind ... takes notice also, that a certain number of these simple Ideas go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing ... are called so united in one subject ... Because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple Ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom our selves, to suppose some Substratum, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call Substance ... The Idea then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them. (277-278).

Although these texts might not be identical, they reveal something of the influence of Aristotle on the thought of John Locke.

### *Substance as general essences*

In this interpretation of substance in Locke, scholars like Alexander (1985) sees Locke as asserting the existence of two ultimate kinds of substances, one being a material substance which is essentially solid and the other being an immaterial substance with an essence less clearly identified. Everything that exists is said to possess one of these two kinds of substances. In this case, there is no general notion of substance that is common to body and spirit. Instead, according to



McCain (2007), there are two fundamentally different kinds of substance-in-general: spirit or matter. The two kinds of substances are not confusing; for Locke (1999) they have their different characteristics: while material substances are characterized by the cohesion of solid parts, and consequently separable parts, and a power of communicating motion by impulse, spiritual substances are characterized by thinking and will, or a power of putting body into motion by thought; consequent to this is liberty. He adds,

And thus, by putting together the ideas of thinking, perceiving, liberty, and power of moving themselves and other things, we have as clear a perception and notion of immaterial substances as we have of material. (287).

How do we come to know about these substances? Locke (1999) writes,

Every act of sensation, when duly considered, gives us an equal view of both parts of nature, the corporeal and spiritual. For whilst I know, by seeing or hearing, &c., that there is some corporeal being without me, the object of that sensation, I do more certainly know, that there is some spiritual being within me that sees and hears. (287).

Locke's recognition of a spiritual being within reminds the reader of the *Cogito ergo sum* of Descartes. Both Descartes and Locke believe in the existence of a spiritual substance that lies within. Like Descartes' thinking substance, Locke describes this spiritual substance as a substance that think. However, the difference between Descartes and Locke is that while Locke comes to the knowledge of this spiritual substance through experience. Locke (1999) writes that "Sensation convinces us that there are solid extended substances; and reflection, that there are thinking ones; experience assures us of the existence of such beings" (296). Descartes comes to the knowledge of his spiritual substance without any experience, giving the philosophy of Locke its empiricist character.

Material substance is meant for material things or bodies, while spirit is a different substance in general, whose essence is perceptivity (power of perception or thinking). To advance this interpretation of substance in Locke, Alexander (1985) sites two texts from Locke's correspondence with Stillingfleet.

my notion of these [real] essences differs a little from your lordship's; for I do not take them to flow from the substance in any created being, but to be in everything that internal constitution or frame, or modification of the substance, which God in his wisdom and good pleasure thinks fit to give to every particular creature, when he gives a being: and such essences I grant there are in all things that exist. (82).

In this text, although no mention is made of the existence of exactly two ultimate kinds of substance, Locke is saying that there is always a stuff that underlies the real essences of things. Pending on the nature of the being: material or immaterial, God modifies the stuff to fit the nature of the being in question.

### *Substance as real essences*

Locke identifies substance with real essences. This is an interpretation that is quite strong and attractive. According to McCann (2007), the claim is not that he identifies the concept or notion of substratum with the concept or notion of real essences, but rather that Locke holds that these concepts speak of the same thing, so that the real essence of the thing is what supports the thing's qualities. The reason for this interpretation is because Locke (1999) speaks of both substratum and essences in the same terms: as that which is not observable. He has spoken of substance as that which supports qualities, in talking about real essences as that "on which all the properties of the specie depend, and from which alone they all flow" (p. 412). If there is any distinction between these concepts in the writings of Locke, Jordan argues, they are merely conceptual. A study of a few texts in which Locke (1999) applies the concepts substance and essence would throw more light:

... therefore when we speak of any sort of Substance, we say it is a thing having such or such Qualities, as Body is a thing that is extended, figured, and capable of Motion; a Spirit a thing capable of thinking; and so Hardness, Friability, and Power to draw Iron, we say, are Qualities to be found in a Loadstone. These, and the like fashions of speaking intimate, that the Substance is supposed always something besides the Extension, Figure, Solidity, Motion, Thinking, or other observable Ideas, though we know not what it is. (278).

In this text, Locke (1999) writes about his notion of substance. However, below are texts in which he speaks of essences:

How uncertain, and imperfect, would our Ideas be of an Ellipsis, if we had no other Idea of it, but some few of its Properties? Whereas having in our plain Idea, the whole Essence of the Figure, we from thence discover those Properties, and demonstratively see how they flow, and are inseparable from it. (366).

He further writes,

... the Properties that flow from this Essence [of a triangle], are more than can be easily known, or enumerated. So I imagine it is in Substances, their real Essences lie in a little compass; though the Properties flowing from that internal Constitution are endless. (377).

From the foregoing, we understand how Locke speaks of both substance and essence in the same way.

## **Conclusion**

Each of these interpretations of the Lockean concept of substance has been criticised. According to Jordan (2012), the principal philosophical challenge to bare particulars, of course, is that it seems nonsensical to speak of a thing which exists, but which exemplifies no properties. This is compounded by the fact that on any construal of the doctrine, bare particulars seemingly must exemplify the property of being such that they exemplify no properties. Thus the very notion seems to be incoherent. A second problem for the bare particulars interpretation, as McCann (1985) has noted that such a position seems incompatible with Locke's corpuscularian view of matter. If material objects are ultimately composed of infinitesimal solid corpuscles, then what metaphysical work is left for bare particulars to do? It is generally agreed that Locke subscribed to Boyle's philosophy of matter, and granted this, it is not at all clear that his ontology has room for bare particulars. As regards the Lockean concept of substances as real essences, Jordan observes that this interpretation seems to ignore that Locke is a dualist. Even if he affirms materialism about human persons, there can be no serious doubt that he acknowledges the existence of at least one immaterial substance: namely, God. And while the interpretation of substance as real essences is in line with Locke's philosophy of body, it is very difficult to see how it could be used to make sense of the relationship between substances in general and particular immaterial substances. The real essence of a body is its microphysical structure. What, then, is the real essence of an immaterial thing? It is not at all clear how one would begin to answer this question, and it is perhaps telling that defenders of the real essences interpretation tend to focus exclusively on Locke's view of material substances. Be the criticisms as they may, the fact that there are problems here and there about these views does not mean that they cease to be Locke's. As much as these views are consistent with the writings of Locke, they express his views of what constitute substance.

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