

Metaphysical Problem of Substance: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: Down through the ages, the human person has been encapsulated in wonder. This wonder is not only intrinsically but also extrinsically motivated. Everything around the human person is a mystery to him. The human mind was uneasy facing the mysteries of life and the universe at large. The reality of change has constituted a serious puzzle to a rational mind. The question now is: What is it that remains despite the series of changes that we observe in the universe? To calm such uneasiness, philosophers have come up to address one of the most fundamental problems in the history of philosophy: the metaphysical problem of substance. Therefore employing the philosophical method of critical analysis, this study is set to critically analyze the metaphysical notion of substance via the views of some selected philosophers. This paper observes that in order to understand any being, it is important to have an idea about the nature of the substance of that being. Also, the study further notes that for there to be any scientific investigation, one must have an idea of the substance (the object of investigation).

Key words: Substance • Being • Metaphysics • Change • Accidents

INTRODUCTION

That there is change in the world is a fact that cannot be doubted. Also that there is stability in the world is another undeniable fact. This idea of change and permanence made the early Greek philosophers to begin to wonder what was responsible for such existential reality. Men and women have laboured and continued to labour to unravel the mystery behind the wonders of human existence and the universe at large. In a bid to resolve the metaphysical problems posed by human experience, various schools of thought arose throughout the course of history, each one offering its own explanation.

For the purpose of this study, we shall take a look at the problem of substance as a metaphysical concept. As we know, the problem of substance has been reflected upon and also discussed through the ages and it still persists to our own day. This paper is therefore set to look at substance as a concept in metaphysics and also to look at its nature. The paper shall also look at the various philosophers' views on substance. Thereafter we shall

look at the notion of accidents as a complement feature of substance and also look at their relation with each other. Finally, the paper will end with a concluding reflection.

The Object of Metaphysics: efore going into the analysis of substance as a metaphysical concept, it will be good for us to know what metaphysics is and also its object of study. Aristotle called metaphysics "First Philosophy" since it studies the first causes and principles of reality. The name metaphysics aptly expresses the central place it enjoys in philosophy; it also differentiates it from other branches of knowledge which Aristotle called "Secondary Philosophies".

Metaphysics is "first" not by virtue of chronological primacy. It is first because it has a natural primacy within philosophy as a whole and with respect to the rest of the sciences. The name aptly expresses the nature of this science, which goes beyond the sphere of material reality studied by physics [1].

To be precise, the object of metaphysics is “being qua being”. As a science of being, metaphysics studies being in its totality. Discussing the scope or the object of metaphysics, Pantaleon Iroegbu has this to say:

[Metaphysics] is a systematic study of being in its deepest aspect. It is an ordered investigation into the inner side of existence. It unravels the most fundamental contents of being and beings. It radically probes existences in so far as these are knowable ... [Metaphysics] involves the physical and the spiritual, the empirical and the super-empirical. It concerns each being, all of being and the being of all [2].

In a nutshell, metaphysics is a science of being as being. Joseph de Torre made a distinction between the material object and formal object of metaphysics [3]. He stated that the material object is its subject-matter, that is, all things and the formal object is the aspect of that material object, that is the aspect of being. This is the metaphysical viewpoint as distinct from that of any other science. Ayo Fadahunsi noted that metaphysics

...is a systematic study of the fundamental problems related to the ultimate nature of reality and human knowledge. Metaphysics is a speculation, not in regard to the particulars of our world, its kinds and spaces, but rather the attempt to find some first causes from which sprang the diversities of reality [4].

Having seen that the object of metaphysics is being, we are now poised to look into the diverse features of being. Among the diverse modes or features of being we find substance and several accidents, which constitute the fundamental features of beings of all created reality. We shall concentrate now on substance as one of the fundamental features of being. Let us first of all take a brief look at the nature of substance.

The Nature of Substance: Substance literally means that which stands under or that which remains under the appearance of a thing as the permanent and basic element sustaining accidents in their being. When we observe some changes in a particular being, there is something in that being that does not change. It is because there is something that does not change that we are able to recognize it despite the observable changes. So, that

thing that did not change; that thing that stands beneath change; that thing that supports the accidental changes is called substance.

Etymologically, the term ‘substance’ comes from the Latin word ‘substantia’ which means that which stands under (sub stare). This Latin word is used to translate the Greek term ‘ousia’ whose significance was in terms of being. *Ousia* is the abstract noun for being [5]. Philosophically, therefore, substance is said to be that which exists in the sense that it does not inhere in another being but has an independent existence as a unit. Its nature is to exist in itself and not in another.

Historical Development of Substance: A Brief Overview:

Filled with awe and wonder about the happenings in the world, the early Greek philosophers began to ask philosophical questions about the cosmos. So, in a bid to answer the existential questions posed by human experience, the early Greek philosophers gave different interpretations to the challenging questions. “Early Greek philosophers,” said R. E. McMall, “was a search for something basic or fundamental in the cosmos, something that would explain stability within the context of change.”[6], It was in a bid to answer this existential question that made Parmenides and Heraclitus to take to extreme positions which later philosophers tried to reconcile. “While Heraclitus held that change was the basic feature of the universe, Parmenides denied this and held that permanence was the primary feature.”[7]. Subsequent philosophers tried to reconcile these opposing views. Empedocles saw that there was truth from both sides. It is an observable fact that there are changes and permanence in the universe. There are some aspects of things that change and there are other aspects that do no change. So he postulated four elements: earth, air, fire and water as the fundamental features for change and permanence. For Anaxagoras, he went further than Empedocles. He said:

There are infinite particles, the combination of which results in things coming into existence. Everything is a combination of all the particles of all things ... In everything there is a portion of everything, for everything is a combination of the particles of all things. However, one particular kind of particle always predominates in it. For example, in gold, there are particles of all things, but the particle of gold predominates in it, hence is called gold [8].

Democritus postulated the atoms as the basic features of all things. Later Plato attempted to reconcile the positions of his predecessors by postulating two worlds, namely, the physical world in which everything changes and the ideal world, the world of forms, in which nothing changes. R. E. McMall points out that the “decisive formulation in the tradition regarding substance was given by Plato in his attempt to solve the problem of stability versus changes.” [9]. It was Aristotle that made great improvement, as we shall see below. St. Augustine writes that “essence usually means nothing else than substance in our language.” [10]. He emphasized not only the sustaining role of substance but also its mutability. So because of the fact that he regarded mutability as proper to substance, he considered it an abuse to call God a substance. On his own part, St. Thomas Aquinas contributed to the clarification of the notion of substance by a synthesis of a special insight with the various insights of Plato, Aristotle and Augustine [11]. Among the rationalists, while Descartes postulated the concept of substance as dualistic, Spinoza and Leibniz postulated substance as being monistic and pluralistic respectively. Later philosophers had their varied views on the concept of substance. In the subsection that follows we shall take a look at the views of some selected philosophers on the notion of substance.

Philosophers’s Views on Substance: Like every other philosophical concepts, different philosophers hold different views concerning the nature of substance. Let us now take a brief look at some of their views:

Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC): Aristotle is of the view that the way we know a thing provides us with the major clue about what we actually mean by substance [12]. We talk of a particular thing in different ways. Aristotle said that we talk of substance and its nine categories. In this sense, the term ‘categories’ refer to the predicates or the accidents. For instance, taking Mary as an example, we can explain the ten categories of Aristotle as follows:

Substance	-	Mary
Quantity	-	Mary is 12.5m tall
Quality	-	Mary is very wise
Relation	-	Mary is better than Nkechi in music
Place	-	Mary is in the classroom
Time	-	Mary was here last week
State	-	Mary is bitter
Action	-	Mary is playing
Position	-	Mary is lying down
Affection	-	Mary is loved

It is the belief of Aristotle that for a thing to really exist, it must be a substance and must have quantity. Therefore, substance, quantity and quality are said to be intrinsic and absolute predicates of a thing where the rest are extrinsic. Aristotle is of the view that we know a thing better when we know what its colour, size, or posture is. Aristotle therefore distinguished between essential and accidental properties of things. For example, to say that a person has black lips is to describe something accidental, since to be a human person it is not necessary or essential that a person should have black lips. But it is essential to my being that I am mortal. Relaying Aristotle’s view, Samuel Stumpf said:

The central concern of metaphysics is the study of substance that is the essential nature of a thing. In this view, substance means that which is not asserted of a subject but of which everything else is asserted. Substance is what we know as basic about something, after which we can say other things about it. Whenever we define something, we get at its essence before we can say anything about it, as when we speak of a large table or a healthy person [13].

It is true that the essence of table or an individual has its existence peculiarly separate from its categories or its qualities, this does not mean that a substance is ever found existing separately without qualities. Our knowledge of matter and form or act and potency will amplify our understanding here. There can never be, in this material world, matter without form or potency without act even though, they are different realities. Aristotle concludes that “substance is a composite of matter and form.”[14].

Aristotle asserts that “substance in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word is that which is neither predicable of subject nor present in a subject, for instance, the individual man or horse [15]. Aristotle affirms that there are two senses of substance: first and second substances. First substance is the individual essence which is determined by real accident and which can be affirmed of no other substances. It is an individually existing substance with all its attributes and accidental modification. On the other hand, the second substance is the universal essence which has been derived from individuals by means of abstraction [16]. In this secondary sense these things are called substance in which the first substances are included, for example, species (man) and genus (animal). So species and genus are second substances. G. Patzig identifies Aristotle’s

substance as “that which is both itself a being among others and a principle and cause of being for all the being in other categories, qualities, quantities, relations and so on [17].

ST. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274): Through the synthesis of a special insight, St Thomas Aquinas made a contribution to the nature of substance. Aquinas does demonstrate that nature exists, since this is manifest to the senses. But he does demonstrate that “in anything there must be something basic, primary and independent to account for the unity of that thing..... that which is the basic and independent source of a thing’s unity and the ultimate subject of all predication is substance.”[18 and 19] Aquinas therefore defines substance as the essence to which per se existence is proper. St. Thomas distinguished between the creature substance and the creator substance. The creature substance is distinguished from God as substance in that every finite substance has its existence as act in relation to which substance is potency, whereas only God is His substance the same as His existence. God is a pure being, a pure Act and as such there is no potency in him.

Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650): Descartes built his philosophy on his methodic doubt. He sought to restructure philosophy on a solid foundation just like mathematics. His thought is in the line of dualism. Stumpf relates Descartes’ view thus: “we know a substance by its attributes and since we clearly and distinctly know two quite different attributes, namely thought and extension, there must be two different substances, the spiritual and the corporeal, mind and body [20].

The concept of substance is very important in the philosophy of Descartes. This is the basis for his philosophical enterprise. He defined substance as “a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing for its existence [21]. This Cartesian definition of substance says more than the Aristotelian notion of substance. Commenting on Descartes’ definition of substance, Omoregbe says that strictly speaking this Cartesian definition of substance applies only to God [22]. Samuel Stumpf [23] corroborated that because Descartes defined substance as “existent thing which requires nothing but itself to exist,” he considered each substance as thoroughly independent of the other. So to know something about the mind, we need not make reference to the body and similarly, the body can be thoroughly understood without any reference to the mind. “Descartes believed in only two kinds of substances: Material

substance, which is defined by extension and mental substance, which is defined by thought, which, in this context, is more or less equivalent to consciousness [24] So as a spiritual substance, the essence of the mind is thinking while the essence of the body as a material substance is extension [25]. Descartes’ conception of substance is dualistic.

Spinoza (1652 – 1677): For Spinoza, there is only one substance. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza’s understanding of substance is in a monistic sense. “The metaphysical system of Spinoza is of the type inaugurated by Parmenides. There is only one substance, God or Nature; nothing finite is self-subsistent.”

[26], Spinoza defined substance as “that which is in itself and conceived through itself, that is, the concept of which it ought to be formed [27]. He worked out the full implication of Descartes’ definition of substance in his book, *Ethics*, where he affirmed that there is only one substance and that this Substance is God or Nature [28]. According to Spinoza,

God, Nature and substance are three different names for the same reality. It is the totality of reality and it has infinite attributes although we know only two of them. These are spirit and matter and it is through these two attributes that we know it. All things are modifications of this substance and are parts of it [29].

Spinoza believes that there is only one substance with infinite attributes. He maintains that we can only know two attributes of substance, namely, thought and extension. Descartes thought that these two attributes showed the existence of two substances, thereby leading him to affirm the dualism of mind and body. Spinoza, though, saw these two attributes as different ways of expressing the activity of a single substance. God is therefore substance perceived as infinite thought and infinite extension. So, being infinite, according to Spinoza, God contains everything [30]. For him whatever is, is in God and without God nothing can be, or be conceived [31].

Leibniz (1646 – 1716): Leibniz was dissatisfied with the way Descartes and Spinoza described the nature of substance, because for him, they distorted the understanding of substance. He therefore conceived substance in atomic form, that is, as the most basic constitutive of all things. In his *Monadology*, he defined

monad as “a simple substance” [32] As such, all things, according to him are made of substances called monads. Monads are the smallest units with which all things are composed. They are indivisible.

Leibniz challenged the fundamental assumption upon which both Descartes and Spinoza had built their theory of substance. Descartes assumed that extension refers to a material substance that is extended in space and is not divisible into something more primary. Spinoza too, considered extension as an irreducible material attribute of God or Nature. Leibniz disagreed with their views. He affirmed that the things we see with our senses are divisible into simple substances since these are compound substances for the compound is only a collection of simple substances [33]. Unlike the atomist, Leibniz argued that the truly simple substances are the monads which he referred to as “the true atoms of nature” or “the elements of things”. Contrary to atoms which are viewed as external bodies, Leibniz viewed monads as forces or energies which are metaphysical points. Each monad is self-contained, without link with any other monad. Each of them is the subject of several predicates. He maintains that all things are ultimately spiritual since the substances with which they are composed are spiritual entities. In this regard, Frederick Copleston relates: “Each substance or monad is the principle and source of its activities: it is not inert but has an inner tendency to activity and self-development. Force, energy, activity are of the essence of substance [34].

John Locke (1632 – 1704): When we look at a thing, what we actually see are qualities like colour, size, height, etc. Even though we observe these qualities, we know also that the qualities cannot exist on their own; they must exist in something which supports them. This, according to Locke, is how we come to form the idea of substance.

The idea ... 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 ... without something to support them, we call that support ‘substantial’ which according to the true import of the word, is, in plain English, standing under or upholding [35].

Samuel Stumpf pointed out that Locke approached the question of substance from the common sense point of view [36]. Despite the fact that Locke approached the

question of substance from the commonsense point of view, he was not able to answer the question with precision. He admitted that “if any one examines himself concerning his notion of pure substance in general, he will find he has no other idea of it all, but only a supposition of he knows not what support of such qualities which are capable of producing simple ideas in us [37]. Locke maintains that substance contains the powers that give regularity and consistency to our idea. It is substance that constitutes the object of sensitive knowledge. The idea of substance, for Locke, is “something we know not what”. Michael Ayers asserts that the only substratum that Locke acknowledges is the unknown [38]. It is pertinent to note here that when Locke speaks of substance he means nothing but material substance [39].

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804): Kant talked about the phenomena and the noumena. His “thing – in – itself” (the noumena) looks very much like Locke’s substance. Just as Locke’s substance is imperceptible and unknowable so is Kant’s thing – in – itself. The world that we can see and can know is the world of sense perception, the phenomenal world which has been restructured by the human mind. Kant’s discussion on substance is that which cannot be known by the human mind.

The Notion of Accident: Since our concern in this paper is on substance and knowing too well that the notion of accidents is practically inseparable from that of substance, I wish to say a few words on the notion of accidents. Aristotle, as we can observe above and even other philosophers, have commented on this concept: accident. Anything added to a substance as a further determination is referred to as accident. In the order of existence, an accident is something that further determines a substance which already possesses a definite level of being from itself. An accident can never exist independently in itself as a substance does; by its nature it needs a substance in which to inhere. Colour and size for instance go with bodies. And so an accident is commonly defined as “a reality to whose essence it is proper to be in something else as in its subject [40, 41]. Whereas what is most characteristic of substance is to subsist, what is most characteristic of accident is ‘to be in another’. Every accident has its own specific essence. We know that colour has an essence distinct from that of temperature and yet to subsist is not fitting to any of them. So the variety of accidents have been classified into four groups [42].

Accidents Which Belong to the Species: These are accidents which spring from the specific principles of the essence of a thing and are therefore properties common to all individuals of the same species.

Accidents Which Are Inseparable from Each Individual: these accidents stem from the specific way the essence is present in a given individual.

Accidents Which Are Separable from Each Individual: these accidents such as being seated or standing stem from the internal principles of their subject, but they affect it only in a transient manner.

Accidents Which Stem from an External Agent: Some of these may be violent, that is, they are imposed upon the subject against the normal tendency of its nature (e.g viral disease), others may actually be beneficial to the subject which receive them (e.g instruction received from another person).

The Act of Being Belongs to Substance: The act of being primarily belongs to substance. From our discussion so far, it is observed that that which is, is that that has the act of being. So “strictly speaking, what properly is, is that which has the act of being as an act belonging to itself, i.e., that which is by itself and this is true only of substance [43]. We can say that a horse is heavy or is white. These are accidents. Accidents do not possess an act of being of their own; rather they depend on the act of being of the substance, which is their subject. This does not mean that the accidents are nothing, they also are, that is, they are real, insofar as they form part of a substance and constitute specific determinations of that subject. Joseph de Torre [44] asserts that the notion of being is applied primarily to substance. He went further to say that a substance can be described as. (1) A unity of being in multiplicity, (2) permanence in changes, (3) the substance of a nucleus core of being on which or in which all other things exist.

Relationship Between Substance and Accidents: Philosophers [45] have made effort to establish the fact that substance is related to accidents in some ways. In this subsection, we make effort to outline them briefly:

- Substance is the substratum of the accidents not only insofar as it supports them, but also insofar as it gives them the act of being.
- Substance is the cause of those accidents which arise from it. The shape of a given animal, for instance, is an effect of its essential principles and for this reason all of the individuals of the same species have a similar shape.
- Substance is to accidents what potency is to act, because the accidents perfect substance. Substance has a passive capacity (potency) of receiving further perfections conferred on it by the accidents which are thus called accidental forms.

The relationship between substance and accidents may seem paradoxical; on the one hand, the substance is the cause of the accidents, but at the same time the substance is in potency to receive them. This paradox is resolved as soon as we understand that substance and accidents are two principles of a thing that really require each other and which cannot exist separately. Furthermore, in relation to the accidents, substance is not both act and potency from the same point of view, but from distinct points of view. The substance is act vis-à-vis the accidents in as much as it gives them a share in its own being, while it is potential with respect to them to the extent that it is perfected by its own accidents. For instance, a human person carries out a number of actions which flow from the activity of his substance, at the same time; these same actions affect him and give greater perfection [46].

Concluding Reflections: So far in this study, we have been able to give a concise analysis of different philosopher’s views on the metaphysical concept of substance. It is quite observable that they do not have one position as regards the notion or nature of substance. But one basic fact is that they have helped us to have a wider knowledge of the nature of substance.

Aristotle actually gave us the basic understanding of substance. This is why it is said that the most influential account of substance in the history of philosophy is the one rendered by Aristotle. Though some philosophers after him disagreed with his theory on substance, his theory, in the view of this study, gives the “kpim” (core) of our knowledge of the concept of substance. It was Aristotle who stated that the central concern of metaphysics is the study of substance, that is, the essential nature of a thing [47]. He has helped us to discover that in order to understand any being we have to study the substance of the being since the act of being primarily belongs to the substance. It is the view of this

study that Aristotle laid the foundation for scientific investigation. For there to be any scientific investigation, one must have some knowledge of the substance or the object of investigation. Joseph de Torre amplifies this position thus:

Aristotle ... reached the substance and thus he concluded that we can have real knowledge or science about the sensible world, since there is a permanent element in it: this justifies the study of all the natural sciences. What would be the point of studying physics, chemistry, biology, etc. if 'everything is changing'? But in fact, there is a permanent element. That is why we can have real knowledge about nature. No science of nature would have developed had this point not been clearly settled by Aristotle [48].

Looking at Descartes' definition of substance as "an existent which requires nothing but itself in order to exist" it will imply that God is the only substance there is, since it is only God that does not require any other being other than himself in order to exist. But even if God is the only substance following the definition of Descartes, I would like to submit here that there are other substances that analogically exist independently. So because of the fact that Descartes considered substance as thoroughly independent of the other, he created a problem of the question of interaction between the substance of the mind and the substance of the body in a human person as a unit substance. However, the detail analysis of this Cartesian dualist notion of substance is beyond the scope of this study.

But in trying to work out the full implication of the Cartesian notion of substance, Spinoza said that God, Nature and Substance are three different names for the same reality. This notion of substance is pantheistic. Leibniz criticized Spinoza's notion of substance as being inadequate because, according to him, "it blurred the distinctions among God, humans and nature" [49]. On the other hand, Hume's position on substance as in other metaphysical concepts, is nihilistic. He termed the whole idea of substance as an illusion. Despite the critical approach of Hume, Kant points out that we can have intelligible knowledge of substance by applying the categories of human understanding. In fact, the problem of the nature of substance is fundamentally the problem of adequate theory of knowledge. In view of this, McMall states:

Empiricism, rationalism and Kant's critical philosophy all fail to evaluate the data of both sense and understanding in terms of the evident unity of the knower ... Modern philosophy's inability to know the thing in itself was its repeated characterization of substance as an unknown, inert and permanent underlying ground of phenomena, appearance or qualities. This false description of substance has contributed in large measure to its rejection by recent philosophy [50].

One thing that stands out in this study is that substance as a metaphysical concept is a reality. It does not actually matter how a particular philosopher or group of philosophers conceive the reality of substance. The fact is that there is something that subsists despite all the observable changes. This understanding, as has been noted above, is basic to all scientific investigation. This study also points to the value of metaphysics as against the views of some thinkers that believe that metaphysics is nonsensical. I make bold to say that the human person cannot run away from metaphysics.

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