

Substance: The Bane of Philosophy

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Perhaps, no other concept has bedevilled philosophy as much as the notion of 'substance', from its very beginnings. The roots of the modern era in Western philosophy are said to lie in Descartes and Spinoza, who founded their philosophy on the very definition of 'substance' which, for them, was almost the same as 'reality', or rather that which was 'really real' as it had the ground of its being within itself. It was, thus, the notion of absolute 'non-dependence' which defined for them, as well as Leibniz; the idea which has played such a pivotal role in philosophy right from the Greeks in their notion of what has been called *causa sui*, and which has generally been designated as 'God' in that tradition.

The British thinkers, from Locke onwards, think of substance as a substratum or support of qualities, a position shared by most Indian thinkers who only added 'motion' or 'activity' which is also supposed to inhere in it, as it too needs a 'support' for it to be there. Hume, as is well known, questions the necessity—just as do the Buddhists—but does not see, like them, that even 'qualities' or 'actions' may have properties of their own, a possibility denied by the Nyāya thinkers in the Indian tradition by an arbitrary fiat of their own. There are adjectives and adverbs in every language and there is no philosophical reason why what they assert should be denied.

'Independence' and 'support' are, thus, the two characteristics which the idea of 'substance' is supposed to provide, and when these characteristics are 'absolutized', they give rise to the notion of that which is fully and ultimately 'real'. The rest is 'real' only to the extent that it displays these characteristics or approximates to them. This, however, creates a dilemma as it not only gives rise to the notion of 'degress of reality' but also to the idea of 'real-

unreal' which is supposed to be a continuum but has radical 'breaks' at the two poles giving rise to the notions of that which is 'absolutely real' and that which is 'completely unreal'. Yet, as the 'unreal' can not be, and as the notion of 'real-unreal' is a contradiction-in-terms, the philosopher is left with the notion of the 'absolutely real', the absolute substance which is completely independent, i.e. absolutely 'relationless' and which still has to provide support to everything else as it is in that that everything has to inhere or that to which everything has to 'belong'. The contradiction between the two criteria could not be resolved and, philosophy, since Plato, has hardly been able to decide which to choose or perpetually to swing between the two.

The 'support' criterion makes the possession of properties essential to the notion of substance as it is what they are supposed to 'inhere in'. Locke's description of substance as a 'know-not-what', therefore, could only have been because of a total misunderstanding of his own position. Kant, on the other hand, was clearer as, for him, it was the relation of 'inherence' that was primary and both 'substance' and 'quality' were the terms between which the relation was supposed to hold. In fact, it was only one of the categories under the heading of 'relation', the other two being 'cause-and-effect', and 'reciprocity'. These 'categories' of relation, as is well known, corresponded to the categorical, hypothetical and disjunctive judgment, respectively, in his Table of Judgments. Kant only forgot, as the Indians did not, that 'qualities' were not the only things that inhered in a substance and that the categorical judgement was not always affirmative. His own analysis of judgements under the heading of 'Quality' should have alerted him to this and made him ask what it was that the inhered in the substance if the judgement happened to be negative. There was, in that case, nothing to inhere as what was being asserted was an 'absence' or a denial which had no 'positive being' whatsoever, and which the Indians called *abhāva*. His valiant attempt to come to terms with this inconvenient fact, which only he seems to have recognized half-consciously in his postulation of the idea of an 'infinite judgement', scarcely does justice to it. The negation is treated as an affirmation and what is supposed to be affirmed is the whole universe of properties excluding only that which was earlier sought to

be denied in the negative judgement. But this was to fudge the issue as the problem was that of 'denial' and *not* of the implied, 'indirect affirmation' which, in any case, was meaningless as it included almost the entire universe in it. The move, though logically clever, was philosophically sterile, as is evidenced by the fact that neither he nor any of his successors could make any use of it. A straight acceptance of the reality of the 'predication of absence' might have opened a direction for Western thought which would have taken care of the type of objections that Quine was to offer later against the ontological postulation of negative entities or 'absences' occasioned by epistemological necessities.

But it is not only 'absences' that may be said to inhere in a 'substance' when they are seen as that which corresponds, or is a correlate of, a significant or meaningful or non-vacuous negative judgement, but also movement or motion which is the basis of all attribution of 'activity' or 'verb predicates' to anything. Motion also, as everybody knows, has to inhere in 'something' and can be 'self-caused' or 'dependent on something else'. Ultimately, therefore, substance is conceived of as that which is the source of all motion and that which has the ground of its being within itself and that which is that to which all properties, whether positive or negative, belong, or that in which they inhere.

But why is there the necessity for postulating such an idea? Why should properties—whether positive or negative—'inhere' or 'belong' to anything? And, why should one feel compelled to think that the 'real' can only be that which is not 'dependent' on anything else or anything whatsoever? The answer lies in what may be called ordinary day-to-day experience on the one hand and the so-called 'necessity' of thought on the other. But both are contingent in an essential sense and once their 'accidentality' is realized, one will be 'freed' from the compulsions of the age-old implications of this belief, even though one may still continue to use the 'concept' for purposes of convenience and even 'see' or 'experience' the world as one 'ordinarily' does, i.e. in terms of 'things' and 'qualities' and describe them in the language of 'subject and predicate', just as one still talks of sun as 'rising' and 'setting' and even 'see' it as such. The 'things' we know are generally complex in character, having qualities belonging to more than one sense, and of each

sense many more in number than one may reasonably enumerate. The 'qualities' thus are both quantitatively and qualitatively indefinitely multiple in number and the 'thing' is supposed to be a 'unity' of them all. The 'unification' may take many forms and the radical diversity and typology amongst 'things' as 'objects' is a resulting consequence of this. The way the elements are organized determines the type that the 'thing' is. Not only this, the way they 'belong' or the so-called 'belongingness' is a function of the way they are interrelated, inter-determining one another in a way that philosophical consciousness has not sufficiently appreciated as yet. Beyond these are the 'unities' superimposed by the purposes man pursues and the attitudes that consciousness takes towards the objects and the 'world of objects', both individually and collectively. The 'purposes' that are pursued may be either theoretical or practical, the former occurring primarily in the context of knowledge where theoretical entities are postulated to give a substantial and substantive unity to the proliferating diversity of knowledge. The practical pursuits of man are equally diverse and the attempts to provide some unity to them has proved even more difficult than that in the former. This is perhaps because the very idea of 'knowledge' presupposes or implies some kind of unity and seems to presuppose or demand it. The idea of 'good' or that of 'value' is too vacuous to fulfil that role, and the former collapses either into a formal property of willing or even 'intending', or into pleasure or happiness which every one is supposed to pursue in any case with the additional admonition that one should pursue it for 'others' also, as if one can do so. As for the notion of 'value' it, as everybody knows, collapses into such an inherent, intrinsic diversity that only the name seems to unite them. Hartmann's is the most well-known name in this connection, just as Kant, Mill and Sidgwick belong to those who have thought about the 'good'. Moore, who found the notion 'indefinable', opted for a relatively simplistic theory of values adumbrated in his chapter on the *Ideal* in the *Principia Ethica* which has not been seen in this way and almost totally ignored by all those who have written on this path-breaking work on ethics at the beginning of the twentieth century in modern times. The fact that Moore's treatment of values skirts the immense complexity and diversity of the notion becomes evident

only when seen against the phenomenological mapping of the realm of values by Nicolai Hartmann in the second volume of his pioneering work on 'Ethics' which, as far as I know, was not investigated further except perhaps by Scheler in his *Nature of Sympathy*.

The Indian attempt to unify all the seekings of man through the concept of *mokṣa* in its theory of *puruṣārthas* not only fails to resolve the unresolvable conflict between *dharma* and *mokṣa* but also ignores, in this context, the intrinsic diversity and conflict in the so-called *puruṣārtha* of *dharma* itself. Not only this, the theory cannot take into account in its threefold or fourfold classification all the seekings of man. Even such an obvious *puruṣārtha* as that of pursuit of knowledge cannot be accommodated in the scheme except by 'seeing' it as seeking pleasure directly or indirectly, a view supposed to have the sanction of the *śruti* itself in the famous statement of Yājñavalkya to Maitreyī in the *Bṛhdāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.

But whether superimposed through the notion of 'purpose' or 'end' in the context of action or through the idea of 'substance' in the context of knowledge at either the perceptual or the theoretical level, the unity that is sought for is itself never 'unified' as it is intrinsically diverse, even conflicting, and varied in nature. But the unity or 'unities' given by the idea of 'purpose' or 'end' in the practical domain clearly reveals that it need not be provided by the notion of 'substance' alone, as has been assumed by those who have thought about it. But, is the idea of substance necessary even in the 'cognitive' context where 'unity' is sought by thinking in order that it may understand what is 'given' or 'encountered' or 'found' by human beings at the sensory level? Are, in other words, the ideas of 'unity' and 'substance' so interrelated that the one cannot be thought without the other?

The idea of 'unity' presupposes the notion of 'identity' which does not seem to involve the notion of substance as the so-called properties themselves have to be granted some sort of identity in order to be treated as 'this' quality rather than that. Not only this, the qualities may, many a time, have properties ascribed to them as the presence of 'adjectives' in every language testifies in abundance. And, if one accepts the ascription of activity to a substance and its inherence in the latter as Indian thought does, then we would have to accept 'adverbs' also which qualify actions as much

as 'adjectives' do properties. Both 'actions' and 'qualities', thus, would have to be seen as themselves providing 'inherence' or 'support', the reasons for which the concept of 'substance' was invented by philosophers to lend a name to that which they thought was more 'real' than all that which 'appeared' in experience as it lay behind them and without which they could not even be thought to 'be', as one would not know where exactly to place or locate them.

The idea of 'motion', or 'activity', creates a problem for the notion of substance which has not been sufficiently appreciated either in the Indian or the Western tradition. It brings in not only the notion of 'time' into the heart of 'substance' or reality, but also that of 'force' or 'effective causality' which plays havoc with it. The source of 'activity'—if it has to be predicated of substance and thus has to inhere in it—would result in its being seen in dynamic rather than static terms as happens inevitably when it is seen as the substrate of properties alone. The problem of 'change' begins to occupy the centre stage of thought and all the problems that it engenders such as those of identity, potentiality and dependence, or, rather, interdependence. The related problems concerning the relation between the 'manifest' and the 'unmanifest' or between 'effect' and 'cause' or that which is posterior and that which is prior, take over and 'substance' begins to be seen as that from which everything flows with an inevitable necessity as, to thought, it is a manifest absurdity that something can ever arise or come into being or be manifested if it was not already there in *potentia* or, as the Greeks epitomized it in their saying, *ex nihilo nihil*. The Christian counter reply is equally epitomized in the famous saying of Tertullian, *Credo, quia absurdum*, which tells not so much about the Christian notion of creation, as has generally been thought, but about freedom which, to reason, is and will always remain unintelligible.

'Shall' then, the notion of 'substance' be understood as per Spinoza who thought everything followed from it *more geometrico*, or as God which creates 'freely' raising the question, how shall this 'freedom' be understood or whether it can be understood at all, a dilemma Kant epitomized so well in the history of Western thought. But both the alternatives seem unacceptable as 'arbitrariness', and

'irresponsibility' are as undesirable as inescapable determination, no matter if it follows from the nature of reason itself, conceived either in terms, of logic or causality as the case may be.

The dilemma may appear inescapable at first sight, but only because for some strange reason, philosophers have convinced themselves that there can only be *one* substance when ontologically thought of, whether as the underlying substratum of properties or that from which everything emanates, as otherwise we will have the fallacy of infinite regress on our hands. But what is gained by this 'final stopping' except the spurious satisfaction of having embarked on an illusory journey for which there could have been no cognitive necessity in the first place as the 'stoppage' of the regress reveals to oneself? One could have stopped a little earlier or a little later, and it would have made no difference either to oneself or to others. In fact, as everyone knows, bringing in 'God' into any discussion, or inquiry or investigation does not help in any way whatsoever. The recourse to a 'unitary finality' is thus unavailing and solves no problem as philosophers seem to have thought uptil now.

The problem, in fact, is even worse as neither 'unity' nor 'finality' nor 'independence' is secured by this desperate recourse as the 'differences' between properties continue to exist and that which is supposed to follow from the nature of substance continues to proliferate and remains intrinsically 'unending', whether conceived of in a causal-temporal or logical way. Similarly, the 'independence' of that from which these are supposed to follow in either of the two ways can hardly be there in the sense desired as that which 'follows' is bound to affect that from which it follows, if it really follows from it as, then, it has to have a 'reality' of its own. This obvious conclusion does not seem to have been noticed because of two factors; one relating to the fact that the logical relation of implication, whether conceived of strictly in the technical sense or not, involves minimally a symmetry between that which is implied and that which implies it. The denial of the former necessarily implies the denial of the latter while, if the implication is strict, even the affirmation of the former implies a corresponding affirmation of the latter. All this is elementary, but one consequence of it has not been seen. In case the former obtains—as is generally the

case—there is no necessity that the theorems or the conclusion follow from the same postulates or axioms or premises as, in principle, they could be derived from some other set also. This is the reason why the fallacy of ‘affirming the consequent’ is considered as such. But if it is objected that if the same set of theorems or conclusions are derivable from two or more different sets of premises, then the difference between them is illusory as formally they cannot but be regarded as the same, then the fallacy will cease to be a fallacy. In fact, the objection, if taken seriously, would have far-reaching consequences as it would undermine the whole ‘Truth-Tables’ on which modern logic is based as the distinction between logical operators or logical connectives is based on it, and the difference between ‘if p, then q’ and ‘q’ ‘if and only if p’ is based on it.

On the other hand, if the relation is conceived of in causal-temporal terms, not only will the same problem have to be faced as the two are formally identical, but the ‘effect’ will have an ‘existential reality’ of its own, producing ‘effects’ in its own turn, and there is no reason why that which was its cause should be immune from it unless it has ceased to exist and so have become intrinsically incapable of being affected by that very fact, or the very production of the effect would have been the cause of its cessation or death, as has been argued by the Buddhists who have argued for the doctrine of ‘momentariness’ of reality.

The idea of ‘independence’ is, thus, as illusory as that of everything needing a ‘support’ or something to ‘inhere’ in, which itself does not need a support or anything else to inhere in. The two grounds for postulating the notion of ‘substance’ to save the ‘world’ from being ‘ungrounded’ do not seem to be ‘well-grounded’ themselves, resting, as they do, on the belief that the world needs to be ‘saved’ because of ‘reasons’ which only the philosopher can believe or appreciate.

That there is an intrinsic irreconcilable incompatibility between the ‘reasons’ which make the philosopher relentlessly press his demand and the desire to ‘save’ the world comes clearly into the open in the advaitic tradition of Indian philosophizing which declared the world to be ontologically unreal and, hence, incapable of being ‘saved’ in any way whatsoever, except for pragmatic

reasons which, of course are anathema for every philosopher. The 'real' in order to be real, has to be without any attributes and thus the question of its being a 'support' of them cannot even arise. Nor can it be a source of causality or effectivity or anything else as it is what it is, self-complete, self-identical, self-fulfilled, eternally at rest within itself, wanting nothing, needing nothing. This is the *Brahman*, the *nirguṇa Brahman* of the pure Advaitins, for whom the world with its incessant change, plurality and difference is ultimately inexplicable, unintelligible, a mirage, a delusion born of some equally inexplicable primeval, beginningless *avidyā* or ignorance from which one would and should wake up like one does from a dream and not even remember that there was a dream or that one had dreamt anything at all.

The Advaitins' exposure of the fallacies involved in the thinking of those who want to conceive of 'substance' and its *relation* to the world in the way they do, poses the dilemma in as clearcut a fashion as possible for all those who care for the 'world' in which they live, have their 'being' and talk about its 'reality' and discuss it with 'others' and write about it. How to 'understand' all this and make sense of it, is the question that thought or 'thinking' has to ask itself, and also find what to do with reasons, or 'reasoning' which seems to compel one to reach the conclusions that the 'Substance-philosophers' or the thinking based on the primacy of the notion of 'substance' has done upto now. There must be some fundamental mistake in the reasons if they lead to a denial of the reality of that very thinking which has led to that conclusion, for if the conclusion is false or unacceptable for some reason, there must be something wrong with the premises or the rules of derivation which have been accepted by the thinking concerned. The simple, time-honoured solution in such a situation—if one does not want the well-attested and well-tested rules and premises to be given up—is to impose a restriction, as is done in logic and mathematics, in order to avoid undesirable or unacceptable results. The restriction, however, in this case would apply to those very 'necessities' of thought which appear to have led inexorably to the postulation of the notion of substance, as explained earlier. But to give up those 'necessities' would be to give up thought itself, or to 'think' in a new way that is 'freed' from those necessities, 'To be independent'

then would not mean to live in a 'monadic' world, or a world where there is no 'other' or any 'relationship', including the one which one can have with oneself if one happens to be a self-conscious being. Similarly, the idea of 'support' or 'substratum' would have to be seen for what it is, an obvious substitute for the notion of a 'perceptual object' combining in itself multiple sense-qualities in a complex and variable manner and a convenient fiction or 'peg' in other contexts to provide some sort of a pseudo-quasi-referential identity to what one is talking about and reifying or 'christening' it by giving it a name. In the former case, there is a perceptual 'something' which is actually perceived and with the 'likes' of which the world we 'live' in is actually constituted, while in the case of the latter it is language that plays the trick and creates the illusion of their being an 'object' in the same sense as the perceptual object is supposed to be. But in either case, there is no such thing as 'substance' in the philosopher's sense of the term, an 'invisible', inapprehensible 'know-not-what'; a 'thing-in-itself' that is unknowable in principle. It is true that the last cannot, in the strict sense, be characterized as 'substance' in the Kantian framework, but that is only a terminological problem, as what Kant calls 'thing-in-itself' and what Locke calls 'know-not-what' are not only both 'unknowable' but function the same way in their systems, even though the grounds or the 'reasons' for them are different. Strangely, the difference in the 'reasons' derives from the difference in the way they conceive of 'knowledge'. For Locke, 'to know' is to 'know a property', while for Kant, 'to know', is to judge and judgement, as everybody knows, involved, for him, what he called the categories of understanding.

'Substance' of course, is a category for Kant, but not a category in isolation. Instead, it is seen as occurring in the context of a relation, the relation of inherence, whose other term is 'accidens' or property. But if it is so, it will have to be seen as a correlate of 'property', and not something on its own. In fact, it is true of all the other categories under 'relation' and, at another level perhaps about all the categories of the understanding as well, as they all occur in the context of a judgement, which necessarily has to be 'relational' in character. The only non-relational 'thing' in Kant is the 'thing-in-itself' but as it has to be necessarily postulated as an

'object-of-thought' in contrast to all that *is, or can be*, an object of knowledge, it has to be seen as that which is absolutely excluded from the sphere of that which he calls the 'phenomena', and distinguished from that which is termed, as is well-known, 'noumenon'. Fichte's attempt to deny the legitimacy of this distinction within the Kantian framework rests on his failure to see the distinction between 'thinking' and 'knowingly', a distinction Kant clearly draws in his *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, even if he did not do so in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

But even if Kant's distinction may be granted, it is not clear why the idea of the 'noumenon' has to be 'thought' except for the reason that the 'phenomenon' cannot be left 'hanging' by itself. The problem Kant is facing is the same as that which was faced by Berkeley, i.e. what to do with the 'objectivity' of the 'world' independent of all 'subjectivity' whatsoever. The 'givenness' of that which was presented or 'presentation' or what he called 'anschauung', had to be 'saved' and it could not be done so by 'God', as was earlier attempted both by Descartes and Berkeley in their different and conflicting ways. One reason for this was that 'God', in order to be God, had to be given 'attributes' and thus become the 'subject' in a judgement whose 'truth' will have to be established non-analytically, i.e. independently of the concept or the definition or that which the ontological argument in the hands of Descartes and others had tried to do. The noumenon or the 'thing-in-itself', on the other hand, was 'unknowable' by definition and hence statements about it had *only* a 'linguistic' reality and enjoyed thus a certitude and truth that was only analytic in nature. But as language could always be understood in terms of what it meant, what was said could be said to have been 'thought' and that is perhaps why Kant called the noumenon an 'object of thought', further suggesting by this phrase that it was a 'shadow' projected by the concept of the phenomenon which alone had a full-blooded reality for him. But then 'shadows' always have a reality of their own even if it be only a 'shadowy' reality, as someone might say. In fact, the distinction between the 'in-itself' and that which is 'known' is always there, involved as it is in the very act of knowing, and not as Kant thought, something that has to be postulated as the 'ultimate' or 'final' distinction without which 'knowledge' cannot make

sense. The distinction is necessary at every step as without it 'knowing' will not be an activity, ever on the move, whose 'resting places' are described as 'knowledge', or rather as 'claims to knowledge', terms which are misleading if they are seen as denying the dynamic, ever-developing nature of knowledge which is the result of the 'knowing-activity', or rather the same activity seen in another way. It is the linguistic statement in which the so-called 'knowledge' is embodied that generates the illusion, as would become evident the moment one looks beyond the linguistic formulation to that which is embodied in it.

But if it is so, the 'idea' of noumenon or 'thing-in-itself' would fall within 'experience' and not 'outside' it, as Fichte tried to point out, without however seeing its significance. The distinction is a function of self-consciousness, and hence is not only necessary but also relative in character. The 'in-itself' is not 'unknowable', as Kant thought, but that which beckons and challenges man to know further and not rest satisfied with what he thinks he has known. This is the situation of 'human knowledge' and to 'think' that one can have some other kind of 'knowledge' free from these limitations is to desire to lose self-consciousness and relapse into just being a conscious being, as the animals are supposed to be, or to attain some other type of consciousness which would be some sort of an analogue to that which Kant conceived of in the realm of morals as the 'Holy Will'. But in both the cases, it would involve giving up the human condition and falling into the illusion that there would be no 'problems' either in the realm of 'knowledge' or of 'action' at that level. The problems are bound to be there as they follow from the very nature of 'being conscious' only the 'specificities' will be different as they follow from the structural nature of the type of consciousness that there is and the variations that are permitted therein by that structure.

The misunderstanding of the idea of substance both as the support of properties and as the source of causal efficacy may, thus, be seen as resulting from that foundational mistake which man has suffered from the moment he started 'reflecting' on his situation and thinking that if he were some other kind of being, he would not suffer from the problems he finds himself suffering from, and from which he does not know how to find an escape with all the

ingenuity of reason which is both his pride and despair as that is the only thing he has at his disposal to solve his problem. But man is unable to solve the problems that reason itself raises as well as those that arise from the 'existential' conditions which define and constitute what 'being a human being' is.

The way out perhaps is not only to accept the human condition in its existential aspect with all the limitations that this entails, but also to see through the illusion and discover how it is generated and thus getting 'freed' from it to some extent so that it no longer has that obsessive, compulsive 'binding' power that it had when it was there and functioned unconsciously without one's knowing how one was determined the way one was determined.

At a deeper level still, perhaps, the problem is related to the problem as to how to 'see' the problem *qua* problem and to defuse or render it as harmless as one can, or even to immunize oneself to the extent that one can from its negative effects and yet enjoy it as it is the spice of life, for what would 'life' be if there were no problems in it. The 'giving up' of the troublesome idea of substance the way it has obsessed the philosophical consciousness over millennia and yet retaining it for day-to-day purposes of thinking may, hopefully, help in this and be the first step in 'freeing' man from the delusions that philosophy has saddled him with since its very beginning.

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