

Substance

“I consider the notion of substance to be one of the keys to the true philosophy.”
(Leibniz, *Letter to Burnett* 20/30 January 1699, in AG 286)

Three Key Features

Aristotle shapes the early modern discussion: “A substance [οὐσία]—that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all—is that which is neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g., the individual man or the individual horse.”
(*Categories* 2a12–4)

1. Substance is the *subject of predication* (the entity that has properties). What is ‘said of’ something x is the kind or universal that x falls under (the genus). So, a substance is a particular entity that cannot be predicated of anything.
2. Substance has *independent existence*: it can exist by itself. What is ‘in a subject’ is what is dependent for its existence on that subject. It cannot exist separately from that entity. A substance is hence an entity that is existentially independent. In contrast, modes or properties cannot exist without a substance in which they *in-here* (a smile). Locke: “But were the Latin words *Inhaerentia* and *Substantia*, put into the plain English ones that answer them, and were called *Sticking on*, and *Under-propping*, they would better discover to us the very great clearness there is in the Doctrine of *Substance and Accidents*, and shew of what use they are in deciding of Questions in Philosophy.” (*Essay* 2.13.20)
3. Substance is a *unity* (a one): an ‘*in*-dividual’. “To put it briefly, I hold this identical proposition, differentiated only by the emphasis, to be an axiom, namely, *that what is not truly one being is not truly one being either*.” (*Letter to Arnauld*, 30 April 1687, in AG 86).

Descartes: Complete Understanding, Complete Thing

- *Second Meditation* (§§11f.): the meditator has a *complete understanding* of a piece of wax as ‘something extended, flexible, and changeable’. Also: ‘I have a complete understanding of what a body is when I think that it is merely something having extension, shape and motion’ (*First Replies*, AT VII 121, CSM II 86).
- Challenged by Arnauld, Descartes explains: “[A]fter saying that I had a ‘complete understanding of what a body is’, I immediately added that I also ‘understood the mind to be a complete thing’. The meaning of these two phrases was identical; that is, I took ‘a complete understanding of something’ and ‘understanding something to be a complete thing’ as having one and the same meaning. [... B]y a ‘complete thing’ I simply mean a substance endowed with the

forms or attributes which enable me to recognise that it is a substance.” (*Fourth Replies*, AT VII 221–2, CSM II 156; see also Reading [2], §60)

- To understand something completely is to ‘understand the thing well enough to know that my understanding is *complete*’ (*ibid.*): nothing could be added; the outcome of the clarifying and ‘defusing’ process of achieving a CDP.
- *Criticism*. Gassendi: a blind person feels heat, and learns that this heat comes from the sun, then has a CDP of the sun as a *heating thing* (*Fifth Objections*, AT VII 338, CSM II 235). Locke: “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*.” (*Essay* 2.23.2)

Leibniz: Substances and Bodies

Five Central Assumptions:

1. *Completeness*: a substance has a complete notion (Reading [3] §8).
2. *Individuality*: remains identical through change, secures continuity.
3. *Unity*: a non-accidental ‘one’, *unum per se*, a simple (Readings [4] and [5], a ‘true atom of nature’ (Reading [6] §3).
4. *Self-Sufficiency*: causal and explanatory independence (Reading [6] §18).
5. *Agency*: source of activity, what moves, entelechy (*ibid.*).

Since they lack these features, bodies or material objects (rocks) are not substances. But what are they? Three approaches:

- A *Composition*. Monads compose bodies; i.e. immaterial indivisible substances constitute or generate material objects. This seems incoherent.
- B *Idealism*. Bodies are ‘true phenomena’, like rainbows, but not real substances. They are ‘well-founded’ in the harmoniously coordinated perceptions of substances. Bodies can be *reduced* to perceptions: “I don’t really eliminate body, but reduce [*revoco*] it to what it is. For I show that corporeal mass [...] is not a substance, but a phenomenon resulting from simple substances, which alone have unity and absolute reality.” (*Letter to de Volder*, 1704/1705 in AG 181)
- C *Panorganicism*. A monad is a soul, or form, in Aristotle’s sense of *anima*: hence ‘all of nature is full of life’ (Reading [5] §1). It provides unity (‘in-forms’) an organic body, which in turn ‘en-matters’ form. Every monad (even ‘bare’ ones) has its own dynamic ‘organic machine’ (a process). So, rocks are alive, however dimly: ‘each portion of matter can be conceived as a garden full of plants, and as a pond full of fish’ (see *Monadology* §§66–71). Remember: monads differ in terms of the clarity and distinctness of their perceptions.

