

## Locke on Substance

From the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Bk II, Ch. XXIII):

“§1. The Mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple *Ideas*, conveyed in by the *Senses*, as they are found in exterior things, or by *Reflection* on its own Operations, takes notice also, that a certain number of these simple *Ideas* go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing, and Words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called so united in one subject, by one name; which by inadvertency we are apt afterward to talk of and consider as one simple *Idea*, which indeed is a complication of many Ideas together; 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*.

§2. So that if any one will examine himself concerning his *Notion of pure Substance in general*, he will find he has no other *Idea* of it at all, but only a Supposition of he knows not what support of such Qualities, which are capable of producing simple *Ideas* in us; which Qualities are commonly called Accidents. If any one should be asked, what is the subject wherein Colour or Weight inheres, he would have nothing to say, but the solid extended parts: And if he were demanded, what is it that Solidity and Extension adhere in, he would not be in a much better case than the *Indian* before mentioned [cf. *Essay* 2.13.19]; who, saying that the World was supported by a great Elephant, was asked what the Elephant rested on; to which his answer was, a great Tortoise: But being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-back'd Tortoise, replied, something, he knew not what. And thus here, as in all other cases where we use Words without having clear and distinct *Ideas*, we talk like Children; who being questioned what such a thing is, which they know not, readily give this satisfactory answer, That it is *something*; which in truth signifies no more, when so used, either by Children or Men, but that they know not what; and that the thing they pretend to know and talk of, is what they have no distinct *Idea* of at all, and so are perfectly ignorant of it, and in the dark. 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 substantive*, 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*.”

*Study Questions.*

1. How do we acquire the idea of substance? Consider an example.
2. Recalling Descartes's characterisations, what kind of idea is this?
2. So, what is substance for Locke?

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