

# Critical Views 2: The Early Modern Opposition

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Zita Toth, [zita.v.toth@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:zita.v.toth@kcl.ac.uk)

# Overview

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# Reminder: Matter and Form(s)

What are substances composed of?

- **integral parts**: elements.
- **metaphysical parts**: parts that aren't integral parts.
- **substance** = **prime matter** [is it extended? is it real?] + **substantial form(s)** [how many?] + **accidents** [are they real? what do they inhere in?]
- How can we apply this framework to a human being?
- What can we apply it to, in general? (Soul? Angels? Celestial bodies?)

Critiques:

- Maybe the bundle theory is true (no subjects);
- Maybe atomism is true

How does hylomorphism fare with (early) modern philosophy and science?

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- In general: preoccupation with knowledge and how we can gain it; the place of secondary qualities (colour, etc.) changes
- How can we know substances and their metaphysical parts?
  - scholastics: by abstraction; we *sort of* sense them, but not directly.
  - Descartes: we don't really.
  - Locke: we don't.

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# Problem: Veiled Subjects?

Can we know metaphysical parts, especially those that aren't accidents?

## Doctrine of the Veiled Subject

Beneath the sensible qualities there is something more, some subject of those qualities that we cannot even in principle perceive.



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# The Veiled Subject: Motivations

- substance = prime matter + substantial form. **Are either of these parts knowable?**
  - **PM certainly isn't**; it's not active, so cannot give rise to any understanding. *Maybe* we can have some partial grasp, but probably not even that.
  - Maybe we can have inferential knowledge of PM; if you observe a fire, you observe the qualities, and then, maybe you can draw inferences of the underlying principle. For PM, you have to even replace the fire. . .
  - **Substantial form: also veiled!** (Aquinas: veiled but not unknowable; this optimism fades)

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# The Veiled Subject: Motivations

- the metaphysical substance cannot be directly observed at all: **subjects and accidents are distinct**, and we are only directly acquainted with the latter. But can we get a concept of substance from a concept of accident(s)? (arguably: not.)
- This seems to be true along the Porphyrian tree: we cannot define the true nature of substance in general, nor any of the more specific genera, nor the nature of an individual substance (**what's the difference between a bare cat and a bare giraffe??**)

So this is not very promising.

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- **Aquinas**: substances are hidden, but can become gradually known by the study of their accidents.
  - but: it's hard to know when perception ends and inference begins
  - even animals seem to be able to see substances; but if it's inferential, then it would imply they can't.
- **Oresme** (14th c.): our sensory data has not just accidents in it but substance. In seeing the colour of a cat, we see not just the colour but also the cat itself.
- Can't we just equate the elements with their qualities? (cf. bundle-theory!) – in some sense, the corpuscularians did.

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# Lifting the Veil? 2

Perhaps things got worse when the veil also assumed the **veil of ideas**: we don't experience accidents as inhering in the substances, but only our own ideas!

So, some more radical attempts to lift the veil(s):

- **Hobbes**: no substance/accident distinction; accidents are only the mode of our perceiving a thing (so, they are subjective).
- **Newton**: bodies are impenetrable segments of space, where space is almost like prime matter, and the effects of the divine will are analogous to substantial forms (organising space). Still unknowable, but there is no *object* to know.

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# Descartes on Substance

- substance = what sub-stands & subsists; the subject of the things revealed by sense.
- minds and bodies are the subjects of thought and extension
- the substance causes its qualities (“hedgehog”)
- distinction between substances and properties
- substances are only known indirectly



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# Descartes on Substance: Veiled Subjects

## *2nd Meditation*

Let us consider those things which are commonly thought to be more distinctly grasped than anything else: I mean the bodies we touch and see. . . . Let us, for example, take this wax: it has only just been removed from the honeycomb; it has not yet lost all the flavour of its honey; it retains some of the scent of the flowers among which it was gathered; its colour, shape, and size are clearly visible; it is hard, cold, easy to touch, and if you tap it with your knuckle, it makes a sound. In short, it has all the properties that seem to be required for a given body to be known as distinctly as possible. But wait—while I am speaking, it is brought close to the fire. The remains of its flavour evaporate; the smell fades; the colour is changed, the shape is taken away, it grows in size, becomes liquid, becomes warm, it can hardly be touched, and now, if you strike it, it will give off no sound. Does the same wax still remain? We must admit it does remain: no one would say or think it does not.

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## *2nd Meditation*

Yet here I marvel at how weak and prone to error my mind is. . . . For we say that we see the wax itself, if it is present, not that we judge it to be there from its color or shape. From this I might immediately have concluded that the wax is grasped by the eye's seeing it, and not solely by the mind's inspection. I might have, at least, if I had not then happened to see through the window men crossing the square. Ordinarily, I say that I see the men, no less than the wax. But what do I see, other than hats and coats, which could conceal automatons? I judge that they are men. And so something that I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact comprehended solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind.

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# Descartes on Substance: The Wax

- **conclusion:** we apprehend substances through the mind rather than through the senses, and the essence of material substances is *extension*.
- **assumption:** **the indiscernibility of identicals:** if two things are identical, they must have the same property.
- the wax and its properties clearly don't have the same properties, because the latter change while the former does not.
- So, what do we know about the wax itself? — it is extended (so treatable by Geometry!)
- the wax is a pure substance just as the mind is (but we have much better knowledge of the latter).



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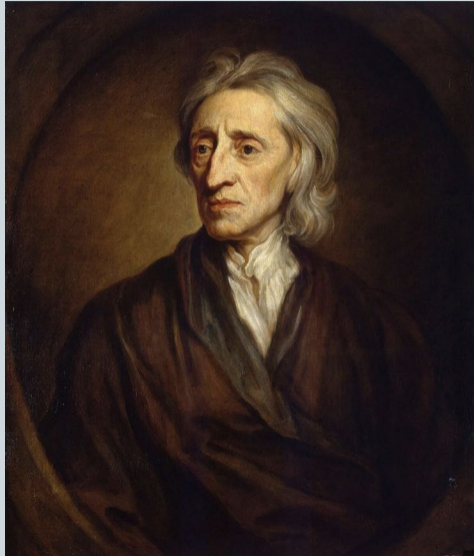
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# Locke on Substance

- **main concern:** not to construct a metaphysics; but to describe our ideas and language and find some foundation for them.
- **What can we say about our idea of *substance*?**
  - **it is complex;** must originate from the ideas of sensible qualities, but we don't sense substance directly
  - we *assume* that there is something that underlies and supports these qualities and from which they result



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## Essay, XXIII.3

“[T]he substance is supposed always something besides the extension, figure, solidity, motion, thinking, or other observable ideas, though we know not what it is.”

- we are unable to define what a substance is
- we also don't know what substance *kinds* are (cf. the Porphyrian tree — on any level of it)
- or what it is to be a substance in the most general.

In short, we don't know individual essences, nor the general substance; we only know that accidents are caused by the substance and that it underlies. Spiritual substances are no worse in this respect than material ones.

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So, why should we suppose that substances exist, if we know nothing about them?

- it's not exactly *nothing* that we know; we just don't have a clear and distinct idea of them (on any level). Of course you can talk about a man or a horse.
- something has to support the qualities.
- committed to the quality/substance distinction, so needs something that can unite them (contra bundle theory); substance as an organisational principle

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# A Brief History

- substances, and their metaphysical parts started to fall out of favour during and after the Scientific Revolution
- But the process was slow: we still have it in Descartes and Locke
- Can we explain *all* observable phenomena by just bodies and their motions? (*heat* was a problem for a long time, personal identity etc. apart.)
- Measurement became very important — but it seems that Aristotelian substances are not measurable, strictly speaking (perhaps they need not be).

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