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THE PROBLEM OF SUBSTANCE IN METAPHYSICS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of substance varies with various philosophers, depending on the school of thought to which they belong. While the materialists would develop a materialistic concept of substance, the idealist would definitely develop a spiritual or idealistic concept of substance. For the thoroughgoing empiricist, since substance is not something that can be seen or touched, one would expect that he would deny the existence of such a thing. The researcher in this piece studies the concept of substance in the different epochs in the history of philosophy: the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary times, this is not without defining the concept of substance. Very significant in this study is the African concept of substance. Issues in metaphysics have often been treated as Western issues; the researcher however investigates the African concepts of substance to point out the contribution of Africa to the development of metaphysics and philosophy as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

The word metaphysics was first used by Andronicus of Rhodes, who was then the editor of Aristotle's work, around 70 BC. It is derived from two Greek words, *Meta* which means after, and *physika* which means physics. Brought together, it would literally mean that which is after physics. While Andronicus was editing Aristotle's works, he realised that some were on physics, that is, on physical issues, and so he named them Physics. He also realised that some were on non-physical matters, but without a title. Since they were given no title by Aristotle, he placed them after the work physics, and since he did not know what to call them,

he named them “after physics” (*meta physika*), that is, the treatises that come after those dealing with physics (Omeregbe, 2002). This was how the word metaphysics emerged.

Eventually, it came to be understood as beyond the physical world, and thus, a discipline dealing with realities that lie beyond the physical world. This concept can again be misleading because metaphysics as a branch of philosophy studies the totality of being, in its nature and structure. It is in this regard that Omeregbe (2002) argues that what metaphysicians have been trying to do down through the ages is to give a comprehensive account of the whole of reality, its nature, its structure, and the place of the human person in the universe as well as in the totality of reality. It is an endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted (Whitehead, 1929). In the study of metaphysics, a couple of problems have emerged: the problem of being, the problem of essence and existence, universals, appearance and reality, change and permanence, causality, freedom and determinism, unity and diversity and the problem of substance. The burden of this piece is to study ‘substance’ as a metaphysical problem.

THE MEANING OF SUBSTANCE

According to Onyeocha (2009a), as a result of the vagaries of language, substance has been thought of in quantitative terms, referring to a considerable amount of something. People are referred to as people of substance when they belong to a high class. For instance, the president is said to be a man of substance. A donation is said to be substantial if it is a huge amount. For instance, if one pays, 10,000 naira when 20,000 naira is all that is required, his or her donation is said to be substantial. Something is said to be substantial when it covers a good portion of what is needed. While this could be correct in ordinary parlance, it is not in philosophy. In modern science, Omeregbe (2002) asserts that substance is the stuff of which a thing is made, the material it is composed of. He further traces the etymology of the concept, as deriving from two Latin words *sub* (under) and *stans* (standing), from this, he arrives at a literal understanding of the concept as *standing under* or *that which stands under*. Substance thus means that which constitutes the specific nature of a thing. In this sense, it is synonymous with essence, it is that in virtue of which a thing is what it is, as distinct from other things or from its qualities. Although the meaning of the concept may be cloudy, a tour through the understanding of the concept during the different historical epochs would usher in a better understanding.

SUBSTANCE IN THE ANCIENT ERA

According to Cornford (1912), Western philosophy grew out of religion and mythology in Greece about 600 BC. This implies that before 600 BC answers to fundamental questions about reality were explained through religion and mythology. Thales (600 BC) was the first Greek philosopher who offered a rational explanation of the universe (Omeregbe, 1991). To the questions: what is everything made of, what kind of stuff goes into the composition of things? Thales argued that this primary stuff was water. Thus for Thales, water is the underlying unity in all things (Stumpf, 2000). Anaximander (600-548 BC), a pupil of Thales, held that the original element, the primary stuff of which all things are made must be a neutral element different from all the elements we know: eternal and indeterminate. Unlike Thales, what this thing is precisely, Anaximander does not name, except for what he calls *the eternal boundless*. The third and last of the Milesian philosophers was Anaximenes (528-526 BC). He argued that the primary stuff of which all things are made is air, not water or the

eternal boundless. While for Heraclitus (500 BC), the fundamental nature of substance (all reality) is change, for Parmenides, it is permanence (Onyeocha, 2009b).

Plato (447 BC) makes a distinction between opinions, sense perceptions, particular, individual things and the essences of things or universal ideas. The essences of things he calls Forms. While opinions and particular things, he refers to as mere shadows, reflections or imitations of the real world. These essences for Plato are the substance of things. For Aristotle (384 BC), although human beings have specific characteristics (categories and predicates), which have some kind of being, the being of these characteristics is not the central object of metaphysical enquiry. The central concern of metaphysics is the study of substance, the essential nature of things. He calls the fundamental stuff in every reality substance. He defines substance as that which is not asserted of any subject but of which everything is asserted. He agrees with Plato's belief in universals, however considers that Plato had misunderstood the problem of universals in so far as this belief led him to the conception of Forms, which has an intolerable consequence of not being able to distinguish universals from particulars. This led Aristotle to develop the idea of form and matter, as the two constituent elements of things (Onyeocha, 2009b).

SUBSTANCE IN THE MEDIEVAL EPOCH

With the emergence of the Medieval Era, theocentricism dominated the philosophical sphere, as those who contributed to the development of philosophy were basically theologians. And thus it would not be surprising that substance, unlike in the Ancient Period, would be engaged in religious discourses. In the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, substance and accidents are the two elements that form nature. This takes us back to the Aristotelian dualism on which Aquinas' philosophy is based. The Aquinate's world view sees reality in a dualistic form: essence and existence, the natural and the supernatural, faith and reason, substance and accidents, matter and form, form and privation, potency and act (Gerald Manley Hopkins Achieves, 2003).

Aquinas with other medieval theologians, have employed the Aristotelian concepts of substance and accident in articulating the theology of the Eucharist on the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. According to this tradition, the accidents of the bread and wine do not change, but their substances change from bread and wine to the Body and Blood of Christ (Wikipedia, 2012). Boethius also employs the idea of substance to define the human person as an 'individual substance of a rational nature', *persona est rationalis naturae individual substantia* (Boethius cited in Battista, 1985). This will certainly be different from the universal kind of substance to be proposed by Spinoza and Leibniz.

SUBSTANCE IN THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

During the Modern Period, there emerged an intense interest in the problem of substance. Descartes defined substance as that which exists requiring nothing else to exist. As such, a substance is that which exists on its own. He proposed three kinds of substances: God, the human mind and matter. Spinoza worked out the implications of this definition by Descartes. He concludes that the only substance is God, since it is only God that requires no other being than himself to exist. Whatever name Descartes gives to the three kinds of substances postulated by Descartes, Spinoza argues that they are all the same names for God. The totality of reality, he observes have two attributes: matter and spirit. All things are modifications and parts of this one reality: matter and spirit. In Spinoza, philosophy suffers degeneration into pantheism. Leibniz understood substance in an atomic form. Everything he

argues is constituted by *monads*. And monad, he defines as a simple substance – the smallest unites of which all things are made. They are self contained (without link with other monads) and spiritual entities and as such, since they constitute everything, then all realities are spiritual. With Leibniz, philosophy takes an idealistic turn.

For Locke (1999), a substance is that part of an individual thing in which its properties inhere. Since we can only observe a thing's properties, its substance is unknowable. Locke's sense of substance is rooted in Aristotle's, even though that of Aristotle has no sceptical consequences. Locke's sense of substance is closer to Aristotle's idea of matter and better regarded as a synonym of Aristotle's *substratum* (Butchvarov, 1998). While Berkeley rejects Locke's material substance as inconsistent with the empiricist position, he proposes a spiritual kind of substance which are spirits. We know about the existence of our own spirit through intuition and that of other spirits by inference (Copleston, 2010). This notwithstanding, neither Locke nor Berkeley is consistent with the empiricist principle. David Hume, a thorough going empiricist, denies the existence of both the material and spiritual substance of Locke and Berkeley. Kant speaks of things-in-themselves and things-as-they-appear-to-us. Substances are things-in-themselves. Kant argues like Locke in saying that they cannot be known. Just as Locke's position on substance is inconsistent with his empiricist position, Kant's things-in-themselves is inconsistent with his Copernican revolution. MC Taggart (1967), a British neo-hegelian says that whatever exists is a substance. The universe is the all embracing substance, the sum total of all substances. This universe is a spiritual substance, what we see as material substances are only appearances. From the foregoing, John MC Taggart is obviously an idealist.

SUBSTANCE IN AFRICAN METAPHYSICS

In describing the idea of substance in African metaphysics, the researcher would make reference only to two African philosophies. The first philosophy is the Bantu Philosophy. It was a world-view presented by Placid Tempels to help Western educationists in their mission to civilise the languages, modes of behaviour, institutions and customs of the Bantu people (Njoku, 2010). The fundamental element characterizing Bantu ontology is force (Tempels, 1998). This force is the underlying reality in all things. Thus, this force is the substance of all reality.

In Igbo ontology, *Chukwu*, the name for the Igbo Supreme Being, even though it is contested, is believed to have instilled *chi* in everything. Thus, the essence of each entity is it's *chi*. It is the *chi* that makes an entity what it is and links it to *Chukwu*. According to Nwodo (2004), *chi* is an ontological notion, forming the basis, the core of the people's very being. Part of the consequences of this ontological grounding of the nature of *chi* is its pervasiveness and ubiquitous nature, getting into and influencing all aspects of life, be it ethical, social, economic, political, psychological and otherwise. Okere (1983) and Obanaku (2003) hold the same view and moves on to assert that *chi* equals the western concept of being. As such, *chi* is not just a substance but being.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

A cursory glance at the different concepts of substance during the different historical Epochs in philosophy reveals that the problem of substance has been a thing of concern through the ages to the present time. The first group of philosophers to trace the substratum of all reality were the Pre-Socratic philosophers. Although their attempt might be considered unsophisticated (certainly in our time) and lifeless (water, air, fire etc), they responded to an

important question that would continue to be one of the primary concerns of the enterprise of metaphysics. It is from their philosophy that Plato and Aristotle found footing when they emerged. Even though Plato had proposed an unrealistic World of Forms, Aristotle, still picking from Plato developed a balanced concept of substance that would become a guiding principle for further philosophical reflections in this area. And the philosophies of Thomas Aquinas and John Locke are clear evidences of the impact of Aristotle on the historical evolution of metaphysics.

During the Medieval Era, as one would expect, philosopher theologians employed philosophy in the service of theology; for they found philosophical themes and concepts useful tools in developing and clarifying Christian doctrines. The concept of substance was of much use. It helped in developing and clarifying the idea of transubstantiation and the idea of the Trinity. Although the concept might not have undergone any serious development during this Era, its use was made very relevant as it affected the Christian doctrine, and in this process it gained a wider clarity.

During the Modern and Contemporary Periods, it gained a more serious attention. However, the perceptions from this attention were torn into segments as philosophers from different schools of thought reflected on it. While the idealists accepted a spiritual substance, even though disagreeing on its nature, the thorough going empiricist rejected the existence of such a thing as substance. Be that as it may, the reoccurrence of the discussion on substance in all the ages of the development of philosophy shows the primary place it occupies in metaphysics. In both the denial of its existence and in its acceptance as existing, that which is denied to exist and that which is believed to exist, it is still that which dwells under, that which constitutes the specific nature of a thing; and this is where the African concept of substance as Chi attains a significant place. For the Igbo African, it is not just an abstract concept and unsubstantive one; it is one that has meaning in his day to day living.

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