
UNIT 2 SUBSTANCE AND ACCIDENTS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

Every finite being is constituted of various intrinsic metaphysical principles. And one such metaphysical principle is that every finite being is composed of substance and accidents. In this unit, you are helped to understand:

- Nature of substance and accidents
- Division of Substance and Accidents
- Characteristics of Substance and Accidents

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Substance’ literally means ‘subject or substratum’ that which supports. It is derived from the Latin word ‘substantia’ which means ‘standing under’. Substance thus literally means then “that which stands beneath”. Secondly the role of substance is related to its nature that is something subsistent. This means that it does not exist in

something else, but in itself, as the relatively permanent principle of a being. We can hence define substance as ‘the basic inner principle of relative permanence of a being that becomes.’ From this definition we may conclude that finite beings are composed of a relatively permanent principle which remains primarily the same throughout secondary changes, and secondary principles which may come and go without producing a change in the primary mode of being. The relatively permanent principle is called “substance”, and secondary principles are called “accidents”. There is, however, far more to be said about this concept hence we need to examine this concept in greater detail.

2.2 THE NOTION OF SUBSTANCE

The notion of substance is acquired from our sense experience. It is a primary datum of experience that in finite beings there is a kind of multiplicity even within the confines of the individual being. Remaining the individual it is, the finite being shows itself to be manifold in the order of activity, i.e., it can undergo changes without becoming an altogether different individual. For instance, a small seedling will grow up into a tall tree, drop its leaves periodically, bring forth flowers and fruit; yet it remains the same tree. A baby will grow up and increase not only in size and age, but also in skill, knowledge, etc.; yet internal consciousness reveals to each one of us that we are still the same Ego as five, ten or twenty years ago.

Thus when a change takes place in a being in such a way that this change does not modify the thing in its individual essence, it merely adds a secondary determination; it gives a new mode of being, but does not take away the first or essential mode of being which the thing possessed prior to the change.

When the external senses perceive the changes that take place, the intellect may endeavor to find a rational explanation of this process on the level of being. Thus it conceives the qualities which may come and go as determinations which affect something that is underneath these changes and modify them. The difference between the determinations and their subject is expressed by the terms “accidents” and “substance”. Thus our intellect acquires at the concept of substance and accidents as corresponding to a reality existing in the extra mental world.

The concept of substance may be acquired also from the analysis of our internal intellectual activity. We are conscious that in our acts of knowing our own ego, which first did not think about a certain subject, e.g. electricity, now thinks about it. Hence, again, the acts of thinking are conceived as transitory affections or determinations of a more permanent Ego. This leads us to conceive them as accidental determinations of the substance of our Ego.

2.3 THE EXISTENCE OF SUBSTANCE

When a relatively permanent reality is compared to its transitory determination, the intellect perceives that the latter are real, no doubt, but not capable of existing in themselves. For instance, running, being blue, being struck, etc. are perceived by the intellect as incapable of existence except in a subject which is running, blue, struck,

etc. But is the reality in which these transitory determinations exist capable of existing in itself? If so, then its nature is different from that of the transitory determinations or accidents, which cannot exist in themselves. It presupposes then something else which can exist in itself, and therefore differs in nature from the accidents. Thus we are led to the existence of substance.

If we wish to present a formal proof for the existence of substance, we may argue as follows:

If there is any reality at all, it will exist either in itself or in another. If it exists in itself, it is a substance. If it does not exist in itself but in another, this other exists either in itself or in another. But we cannot continue this series to infinity because an actually infinite series is impossible and does not explain anything. Therefore, substance exists.

2.4 NATURE OF SUBSTANCE

From all that is said so far we need to retain two aspects about the nature of substance

- a) It is the subject, the substratum, in which accidents inhere. The term “substance” can express this function, for it is derived from the Latin “*substo*”, I stand under, I support.
- b) It exists in itself and does not need to inhere in another.

Now the question is to know which of those two is the primary reality of the substance, to support accidents or to exist in itself? While we are willing to admit that psychologically “to support accidents” is prior to “to exist in itself”, i.e., that we arrive at the knowledge of substance through its function of supporting accidents, it should be clear that ontologically, or in the order of reality, “to exist in itself” is prior to “to support accidents”. For in order to act as a support of something else a thing must be capable of supporting itself, i.e. it must exist in itself. If a thing is of such a nature that it can exist in itself, it will be able to act as a support of others. Hence to be subject or a support of accidents is a property which flows from such a nature if there are accidents to be supported. Accordingly, the proper definition of “substance” should not express the function of supporting but the nature which is such that it can exist in itself. Thus we arrive at the traditional definition of substance as “that to whose nature is due a “to be” in itself and not in another”.

“To be in itself”, is not merely a negation of existence in another, but expresses the positive perfection of independence in being. Independence in being, however, may be either absolute or merely relative. By absolute (intrinsic and extrinsic) independence in being is meant that a thing does not depend upon anything else in any way whatsoever it exists not only ‘in’ itself, but also ‘of’ itself. Such absolute independence, of course, can be found only in the pure act that is infinite being or God. Hence if absolute independence in being were required of a substance, only God could be called a substance. But independence may be taken also in a relative sense, i.e., as merely intrinsic independence, which is had when a being exists “in” itself, but not “of” itself. It is in this sense that substances are said to be independent in being.

2.5 A MISCONCEPTION ABOUT SUBSTANCE

Much of the modern opposition to the concept of substance is based upon a misunderstanding of its true nature. A misunderstanding for which perhaps the scholastic philosophers of the seventeenth century are most to blame. When we say that a substance is that where accidents inhere, this function of the substance might convey the impression that the substance is like a pincushion into which pins are stuck, or like an inert piece of rock in the middle of a stream to which things cling precariously. This idea is far from the truth. Substance is not an inert, unchanging support but a dynamic reality. Every time a new accident inheres in the substance, the substance itself is modified. Such accidental modifications take place continuously, so that the substance is continuously “becoming” something. Moreover, the substance is really identical with essence, and the essence is, in a way, the active principle of its proper accidents, which emanate from it “by a kind of natural resultance”. Thirdly, the reality which is the substance is identical with the nature or essence of a thing, which is the primary principle of all activity of this thing; therefore, the reality which is the substance is also the principle of all activity exercised by this thing. Lastly, the activity of a finite being, especially if it is of an intellectual nature, gives meaning to its existence and tends to make it overcome as far as possible the limitation inherent to being finite. If this dynamic character of substance had been sufficiently stressed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, much of the subsequent confusion might perhaps have been avoided.

2.6 DIVISION OF SUBSTANCE

By an analogous division substance may be divided into finite and infinite substance. By a further analogous division, finite substance may be divided into complete and incomplete substance. An incomplete substance is one whose nature must be united to another substantial co-principle. Matter and form by their union become one substantial essence; hence they are substantial co-principles or incomplete substances. A complete substance is one whose nature does not have to be united to another substantial co-principle; for instance, the substances of a cat, a tree, a man. Substances may be incomplete in substantiality, or complete in substantiality but incomplete in specific perfection. A substance which is incomplete in substantiality cannot exist without being united to its substantial co-principle. Such are primary matter and purely material substantial forms. A substance which is incomplete in specific perfection but complete in substantiality can exist-in-itself, but cannot exercise all its functions without being united to its substantial co-principle. The human soul, as we see in rational psychology, is the only example of this type of substance. It can exist independently of the body, but without the body it cannot exercise all its functions, such as nutrition and sensation.

Another important division of substance is primary and secondary substance. In Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy primary substance means that individual substance, i.e. that which ontologically is the subject of accidents and logically the subject of predicates. Primary substance itself has no subject, whether logically or ontologically, but is the subject. Secondary substance, nevertheless has a subject in

the logical order of attribution. In other words, secondary substance refers to the universal ideas (genus and species) under which individual substances are classified. This division also is rather analogous than univocal.

2.7 UNION OF SUBSTANCE AND ACCIDENTS

The union of substance and accidents results in such a way that this union does not bring to existence a new being but only modifies an already existing being. This union will be more clear when we compare this union with the union of essence and existence. The union of essence and “to be” in a being makes a thing to come into existence, that is it gives the first “to be” to the thing; but when an existing thing acquires a new mode of being without losing its first mode of being, as it happens in the union of substance and accidents it does not get a first “to be”, but only a secondary “to be”. When, for example, a bare tree gets leaves, it retains its “to be a tree”, but acquires in addition the secondary mode of being, “to be leaved”. When a man becomes skilled in mechanics, he retains his first mode of being, “to be a man”, but acquires in addition the secondary mode of being, “to be skilled in mechanics”. Thus, while the union of essence and “to be” results in being which is perfectly unified or “one”, the union of the primary and secondary modes of being does not result in a being which is perfectly unified.

As compared with the term “essence”, substance has a more restricted meaning. We may speak about the essence of an accident and about the essence of a substance, but generally we do not speak about the substance of an accident. If, however, we limit the use of essence to that of substantial beings, both terms “essence” and “substance”, indicate one and the same reality, although from a different point of view. By “essence” we indicate what a reality is, whereas by “substance” we indicate the mode of being of this reality.

A last remark, from the foregoing considerations it should be clear that in philosophy the meaning of the term “substance” is entirely different from that in physical science. In physical science “substance” is a subdivision of matter, i.e., of bodies and applies to those classes of bodies which under the same conditions have the same physical and chemical properties. The substance of physical science is opposed to “mixture”, which term indicates bodies with variable physical and chemical properties. In philosophy “substance” is opposed to “accident” and applies to any being to whose nature is due a “to be” in itself.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is the definition, meaning, and nature of Substance?

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2) Enunciate different types of Substance
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2.8 ACCIDENTS: DEFINITION

Accident is defined “as a reality to whose essence it is proper to be in something else, as in its subject”. Concerning this definition let us retain a few points:

- a) Just like substance which has a nature or essence to which subsistence is fitting and which places the subject within a species. Likewise each accident has its own essence, which differentiates it from other accidents and to which dependence on the being of a subject is fitting. For instance colour has an essence distinct from that of temperature and yet to subsist is not fitting to any of them.
- b) The words “as in a subject” are added to the definition to indicate the manner in which accidents are in another. They are not in another as a part is in the whole (a limb in the body) nor as the contents in the container (water in a glass), nor as a substantial form is in matter and gives it its first “to be”, but as form is in a subject to which it gives a further determination.
- c) Because accidents are such that to their nature is due a “to be” in another, they are by their very nature imperfect beings. Hence for example we do not say that accidents, say, whiteness, come to be, but rather that their subject becomes white. However, this imperfection of accidents should not be conceived as if the essence of an accident were incomplete and in need of an essential co-principle. It is a complete essence, but one which lacks independence, and therefore has to inhere in a subject.

2.9 DIVISION OF ACCIDENTS

Accidents modify or denominate their subject in various ways, and to these correspond the nine “Categories” enunciated by Aristotle. They are:

- Quantity,
- Quality,
- Relation,
- Action,
- Passion,
- Time,
- Place,

- Disposition (the arrangement of parts), and
- Habit, or rainment (whether a thing is dressed or armed, etc.)

These varieties of accidents can be classified into four groups according to their origin:

- Accidents which belong to the species : these are accidents which spring from the specific principles of the essence of a thing and are therefore properties common to all individuals of the same species (e.g., the shape of a horse, the powers of understanding and willing in man).
- Accidents which are inseparable from each individual: these accidents stem from the specific way the essence is present in a given individual for instance being tall or short, being fair or dark-complexioned, being a man or woman – these are all individual characteristics which have a permanent basis in their subject.
- Accidents which are separable from each individual: these accidents such as being seated or standing, walking or studying, stem from the internal principles of their subject, but they affect it only in a transient manner.
- Accidents which stem from an external agent : some of these may be violent, that is they are imposed upon the subject against the normal tendency of its nature (Viral disease) others in contrast may actually be beneficial to the subject which receives them.

Beside these, there is sometimes question of modal accidents, by which are meant further determinations of accidents. For instance, shape is a modal accident of extension, which it determines, and pitch is a modal accident which determines sound. Modal accidents affect directly the accident which they determine, and indirectly the subject in which this accident inheres.

2.10 THE REALITY OF ACCIDENTS

That there are real accidents which are really distinct from their subject is unanimously accepted by all philosophers and follows immediately from what we have seen. If there are changes which do not result in a new substance, such changes take place in a subject which loses or acquires a perfection that does not belong to its substantial essence, but is a secondary determination of this substance. Now, if perfection can be lost without a change in the essence of its subject, it follows that this perfection is really distinct from the subject, i.e., from the substance.

2.11 ACCIDENTS HAVE THEIR OWN “TO BE”

It is to be noted that accidents have their own ‘to be’. For example we can conceive that “in Socrates there is one “to be” insofar as he is white, and another “to be” insofar as he is a man..... to be white is a “to be” of Socrates, not insofar as he is Socrates, but insofar as he is white. Hence there is nothing to prevent the multiplication of this “to be” in one hypostasis or person; for the “to be” by which Socrates is white is other than the “to be” by which he is Musician”. Keeping in mind that “to be” merely actualizes

whatever is real, we should have no difficulty in accepting the view that each accident has its own “to be.

There is however an objection to this view is that it seems to militate against the unity of the individual substance. If substance and accidents each have their own “to be”, they may conceivably exist close together but they would not, so it seems, form a unit. To this, we may answer saying that “real distinction between substance and accidents does not destroy the unity of the being”. That both substance and accidents are abstractions of reality. The reality is the concrete individual whole, which is composed of substance and accidents. It is this whole which “becomes” something when a new perfection is acquired by the substance. Hence the “to be” of each accident is really a “to be” of the concrete individual whole. Substance and accidents are not several beings put together to form a whole, but the entire being forms a whole with substance and accidents. The accidents are not complete autonomous realities added to a substance, they are only determining aspects of the substance which complete it and do not therefore give rise to a plurality of juxtaposed things.

The unity of the composite also becomes evident in the case of operations. An animal for instance carries out many different actions which does not hamper its unity. In the case of man, it is neither the intelligence which understands, nor the will that desires, rather it is the person who understands and desires by means of these respective powers and consequently all his operations are imbued with an underlying unity.

Thus a being is a certain whole which is composed of a substance and certain accidents. These are elements which form a certain unity, and do not exist separately. No accident exists without its substance and no substance exists without its accidents except in God who is perfectly simple where there are no accidents found. Hence all finite beings are composed of substance and accidents which form a complete being.

Moreover, substance and accidents are related to one another as potency to act. Now potency and act by their union become one. Although this union of substance and accidents does not result in a perfectly unified being, nevertheless there is real, though imperfect, unity. Were we to require perfect, substantial unity for the composite of substance and accidents, it would be impossible to explain accidental change. Any change in that case would be a change of a substantial unity as such.

2.12 REAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN SUBSTANCE AND ACCIDENTS

A substance and its accidents are really distinct from one another. This can be clearly seen by observing accidental changes in which certain secondary perfections disappear and give way to other new ones without the substance itself being changed into another substance. Such alterations are possible if the accidents are really distinct from the substance which they affect. The colour of the apple for instance is something really distinct from the apple itself since the apple changes in colour when it ripens but does not cease to be apple. All accidents by virtue of their very essence are distinct from their subject. For instance to be divisible is by nature proper to quantity where as

substance is by itself both one and indivisible. Relation is a reference to another, in contrast, substance is something independent.

From the above study we understand that in the metaphysical structure of being we can see that being is constituted of two important principles that is substance and accidents. The relatively permanent aspect is called substance for it is that remains all though while the being undergoes changes. And the accidents are the changing elements.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Describe the nature and division of accidents.

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2) Explain the relation between Substance and accidents

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2.13 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have made an attempt to clarify the notions of substance and accidents the two necessary components of finite beings. We have gone to the root words of these two notions and have enunciated their nature and division. By this lesson we have shown that in every finite being there is a changing element and there a permanent element. This study has highlighted to the fact that though a being could undergo regular changes, at the core of its self it contains a permanent element, it manifests that it is the same being. This study brings to our minds that change is part and parcel of our very existence, but in all the changes that take place the core of the person or the being is not lost but it is enriched.

2.14 KEY WORDS

Substance : Literally means ‘subject or substratum’ that which supports. It is derived from the Latin word ‘*substantia*’ which means ‘standing under’.

Accidents	: are the perceptible qualities of an object such as its color, texture, size, shape, etc; things which change but do not affect the essence of the object are accidents.
Act	: Refers to the mode of being which is existing in its actuality, in its present time. It is “that which is now”.
Potency	: Mode of being which is not yet but the possibility towards the mode of being in act. That which will come into existence.
Essence	: is properly described as that whereby a thing is ‘what it is’, it is the “whatness” of a thing, the <i>quiddity</i> of the thing.
Existence	: is the act of being (esse). It answers to the question “whether a thing is”.

2.15 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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2.16 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The word ‘Substance’ literally means ‘subject or substratum’ that which supports. It is derived from the Latin word ‘substantia’ which means ‘standing under’.

Substance thus literally means then “that which stands beneath”. It is to be noted that every finite being possesses two important components one which is relatively permanent principle which remains primarily the same throughout secondary changes. This relatively permanent principle is called “substance”. We can acquire this concept from our sense experience. We see for instance, a small seedling will grow up into a tall tree, drop its leaves periodically, bring forth flowers and fruit; yet it remains the same tree. A baby will grow up and increase not only in size and age, but also in skill, knowledge, etc.; yet internal consciousness reveals to each one of us that we are still the same Ego as five, ten or twenty years ago. Thus when a change takes place in a being in such a way that this change does not modify the thing in its individual essence, it merely adds a secondary determination; it gives a new mode of being, but does not take away the first or essential mode of being which the thing possessed prior to the change. Amidst the qualities which come and go in a being there remains something underneath these changes; a subject which keeps up its identity all through. This is the substance. The nature of substance is that it exists in itself and it is independent. Besides it supports the accidents which inhere in it.

- 2) Substance may be divided into finite and infinite substance. Finite substance refers to all beings other than the infinite being or God. When we talk of finite substance we can divide it into different types: complete and incomplete substance. An incomplete substance is one whose nature must be united to another substantial co-principle. A complete substance is one whose nature does not have to be united to another substantial co-principle; for instance, the substances of a cat, a tree, a man. Another important division of substance is primary and secondary substance. In Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy primary substance means that individual substance, i.e. that which ontologically is the subject of accidents and logically the subject of predicates. Primary substance itself has no subject, whether logically or ontologically, but is the subject. Secondary substance, nevertheless has a subject in the logical order of attribution. In other words, secondary substance refers to the universal ideas (genus and species) under which individual substances are classified.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Accident is defined “as a reality to whose essence it is proper to be in something else, as in its subject”. Accidents inhere in a subject called substance. They cannot exist on their own. Thus for example colour cannot exist on its own, it is always in a subject like a cloth, building, or any object. Because accidents are such that to their nature is due a “to be” in another, they are by their very nature imperfect beings. Although accidents do not exist on their own they nevertheless have their own to be. For example we can conceive in a human person that he has a ‘to be’ of his colour, another ‘to be’ in his size, another ‘to be’ in his place and so on. Hence there is nothing to prevent the multiplication of this “to be” in one hypostasis or person. Accidents modify their subject in various ways. These modifying attributes Aristotle calls them as categories. They are nine: Quantity, Quality, Relation, Action, Passion, Time, Place, Disposition (the arrangement of parts), and Habit, or rainment (whether a thing is dressed or armed, etc.).

**Metaphysical Structure of
Finite Being**

- 2) Substance and accidents are mutually related to one another. Substance and accidents are not several beings put together to form a whole, but the entire being forms a whole with substance and accidents. The accidents are not complete autonomous realities added to a substance, they are only determining aspects of the substance which complete it and do not therefore give rise to a plurality of juxtaposed things. We can verify the unity between substance and accidents in the activity of a being. An animal for instance carries out many different actions which does not hamper its unity. In the case of man, it is neither the intelligence which understands, nor the will that desires, rather it is the person who understands and desires by means of these respective powers and consequently all his operations are imbued with an underlying unity.