

Background on Substance

1 How the distinction between substance and attributes was used

First, a distinction between what things are and what we can know about them. Substances are what things are and attributes are what we know.

I have frequently remarked above that there is no idea of God or of the soul. I now add that there is no idea of substance, for substance (given that it is matter subject to accidents and changes) is something concluded to solely by a process of reasoning; nevertheless, it is not conceived nor does it display any idea to us. (Hobbes [1651] 2019, 81L)

There are certain acts which we call “corporeal,” such as size, shape, motion, and all the other properties that cannot be thought of apart from their being extended in space; and the substance in which they inhere we call “body.” Nor is it possible to imagine that it is one substance that is the subject of shape and another substance that is the subject of movement from place to place, and so on, since all these acts have in common the one feature of being extended. In addition, there are other acts, which we call “cogitative” (such as understanding, willing, imagining, sensing, and so on), all of which have in common the one feature of thought or perception or consciousness; but the subject in which they inhere we say is “a thing that thinks” or a “mind,” or any other thing we choose provided we do not confuse it with corporeal substance, since cogitative acts have no affinity to corporeal acts, and thought, which is the feature they have in common, is utterly different in kind from extension, which is the feature the others have in common. (Descartes [1641] 2019, 78L)

Second, substances identify things and distinguish them from other things. For Descartes, a substance is “a thing that is suitable for existing in itself” (Descartes [1641] 2019, 51L).

Third, substances are used to explain identity despite change. Substances stay the same while attributes change.

because bodies are subject to change, that is to say, to variety of appearance to the sense of living creatures is called *substance* — that is to say, *subject* to various accidents, as sometimes to be moved, sometimes to stand still — and to seem to our senses sometimes hot, sometimes cold, sometimes one color, smell, taste, or sound, sometimes to another. And we attribute this diversity of seeming (produced by the diversity of the operation of bodies on the organs of our sense) to alterations of the bodies that operate and call them *accidents* of those bodies. And according to this meaning of the word, *substance* and *body* signify the same thing. (Hobbes [1651] 2019, 135L)

2 Attributes

There is also a distinction among attributes.

1. Essential attributes. E.g. extension for bodies.
2. Inessential attributes ("accidents"). E.g. size or shape of bodies.

References

Descartes, René. (1641) 2019. "Meditations on First Philosophy." In *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, edited by Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, translated by Donald Cress, 3rd ed., 35–68. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Hobbes, Thomas. (1651) 2019. "Leviathan." In *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, edited by Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, 3rd ed., 120–42. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.