UNIT 10: SUBSTANCE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Define substance
- Explain Aristotle's position as a pioneer in analysing the concept of substance
- Discuss Rationalist philosophers view on substance
- Explain how the Empiricists' treat the issue in the context of the empirical world.
- Critically analyse the strength of these views in presenting the concept.
- Conceptualise the contemporary debate on defining substance.

10.2. INTRODUCTION

Substance is one of the central metaphysical concepts attracting the interest of philosophers over time. The problem is as old as philosophy itself. It is discussed with equal significance both in Indian and Western philosophy. A number of philosophical problems have centred round the concept of substance.

The concept finds its root in the Greek philosophy prior to Aristotle. In our daily living we come across different things which keep changing over time and still get recognised as the same thing. Here, some query may occur regarding what ascertains that it is the same object even after all changes. Here comes the reference of substance-the basic essence of everything having changes.

10.3. WHAT IS SUBSTANCE?

Roughly substance can be defined as that which remains unchanged or which is durable. There are various definitions offered to define the concept of substance. If we look for the etymological meaning of the term substance then we find primarily two definitions-- one from the Greek explanation and the other is from Latin. In Greek philosophy Aristotle defines substance through the term Ousia, meaning "being". Again in Latin the original term for substance is Substantia, which refers to "something that stands under or grounds things". These terms, thus, refer to the basic essence underlying the different things or objects.

With the development of philosophical debates over the concept there appear different definitions defining substance. Briefly, substance can be said to be that being which is durable, fundamental and independent from other objects for its existence; it is the thing from which other things emerge. The detail definitions are discussed below according to different philosophers offering them.

In Western philosophy serious contemplation on the concept of substance is said to have initiated from the philosophy of Aristotle. But prior to Aristotle any reference to the subject cannot be overruled. Though not clearly referred, Plato's concept of the Ideas or Form as the ultimate reality may be regarded as substances. Further, even before Plato, reference may be made to the pre-Socratic philosophers who talk about the basic stuff of the universe out of which the world is constituted. Thales considers 'water' as the primary stuff, for Anaximander it is "Formless Mass", for Anaximenes

it is 'Air'; 'Change' or 'Flux' for Heraclitus, for Pythagoras it is 'Number', and for Democritus and Leucippus 'Atom' is the ultimate stuff of the universe. However, in Western philosophy the earliest and most influential analysis of the concept of substance is considered to be that of Aristotle, detailed in his books Categories and Metaphysics Z.



LET US KNOW

A comprehensive discussion of the concept of substance is also found in Indian philosophical system. In the Vaisesika school of Indian philosophy substance is called Dravya and is recognised as one of the six positive categories. Vaisesika system talks about nine substances. They are earth, water, fire, air, ether, space, time, mind and soul.

10.4. ARISTOTLE'S VIEW

Aristotle, in his book Categories defines substance in the following way:

"Substance in its truest and primary and most definite sense of the word is that which is neither predictable of a subject not present in a subject; for instance, the individual man or horse."

With different broad definitions Aristotle introduces the concepts of primary substance and secondary substance in his book Categories. This difference points towards the difference between the particular individual objects and the species or kind they belong to. Aristotle says that substance in the most basic sense of the word is the concrete individual. This sense refers to the primary substance. An individual man or a horse represents the concept of primary substance. Such substances are neither predicable of nor attributable to anything. Again secondary substance indicates those concepts in which the primary substance is included. For example, "Albert

is a man". In this statement 'Albert' is primary substance and 'man' is secondary substance. In this sense Aristotle considers essences or natures as substances. The more qualities a thing comprises the more substantial it is. Here substance reveals to be a matter of degree. Aristotle's analysis lacks a comprehensive single definition of the concept and in the entire discussion he seems to put forward six different senses of it. Thus, a substance is:

1. A concrete individual.
2. A core of essential properties.
3. That which is capable of independent existence
4. A centre of change.
5. A substratum. It is that to which qualities and attributes belong.
6. A logical subject.

These definitions are never further reconciled into a single sense in Aristotle's work. Without clarifying these definitions he, further, in the Metaphysics Z offers another definition of substance in terms of Form and Matter, about which he did not mention anything in the Categories. Form is the shape or essence of a thing to which it is made into and Matter refers to that from which it is made of. However, neither Form nor Matter stands for a particular kind of stuff. Matter differs according to the object it refers to or constituted into. In case of a human being it is flesh and blood, in case of a gold ring it is gold, thread in cloth etc. These two types of substances resemble to the formal cause and material cause of the Nyaya-Vaisesika system of Indian Philosophy.

With broad interpretations Aristotle's account, thus, remains influential even being unclear. The philosophers after Aristotle present their account of substance remaining close to the definitions offered by him.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is the etymological meaning of the term substance according to Latin origin?

Ans: .....

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Q2: Name the books in which Aristotle presents his definition of substance.

Ans: .....

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Q3: Give an example of primary substance according to Aristotle.

Ans: .....

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10. 5. RATIONALISTS' VIEW

Refuting the authenticity of sense experience, the rationalists begin with absolute faith in reason as the source of knowledge. Among the post Aristotelian rationalist philosophers the most prominent name is René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy. Descartes' view is one of the most discussed views in the rationalist tradition. Defining substance, he says, "Really the notion of substance is just this-that which can exist by itself, without the aid of any other existence." In other words substance cannot depend on anything for its existence. It must exist on its own. If something is dependent on some other thing for its existence then it cannot be said to be a substance. As per this definition Descartes identifies three substances-God, Mind and Body. God, according to him, is that who exists in Himself and through himself and does not involve the existence of anything else. God necessarily exists and His existence sufficiently guarantees our knowledge against doubt. However, Descartes does not stop there. Besides God, he ascertains two more substances, i. e., mind and body. Mind and

body are presented as two relative substances, partly dependent on God. Though the application of methodical doubt Descartes reaches at Cogito ergo sum and affirms the existence of mind and material bodies. While the essential property or attribute of mind is consciousness, the attribute of body is extension. According to Descartes, in order to reach at conscious substance one need not refer to the extended substance and again for knowing the extended substance one need not refer to consciousness. Hence, consciousness and extension, mind and body stand as two independent substances. But, what about the interaction between mind and body? What makes this influence possible between two independent substances? When it comes to the matter of interaction between mind and body, Descartes takes resort to the interference of God which in a mysterious way adds soul to the human body. Thus, mind and body depend on God for interaction and God remains the independent substance. If we go as per Cartesian definition then mind and body cannot be regarded as substances as they are dependent on the mercy of God. Hence, if logically considered Descartes should have recognised just one substance that is God.

The inconsistencies of Cartesian view got countered by Spinoza through his monistic view. While contemplating over the definition of substance he looks for something from which everything follows necessarily. Even defining substance as independent entity Descartes talks about mind and body as two relative substances dependent on God. Spinoza criticises it and holds that it is not possible to affirm of more than one substance. A substance cannot depend on anything else or be countered by anything else. If there were more than one substance they would limit each other and thus, will cease to be self-sufficient. Descartes' doctrine of substance suffers from these limitations. So, for Spinoza there is just one substance that is God. The substance in Spinoza's view is self-contained, self-determined and immune to any external affect. A substance is that "which is in itself and conceived through itself." It is causa sui.

Spinoza rejects Cartesian dualism and the substantiality of mind and body as well. Mind and body, according to him are nothing but two co-

existent attributes of the single substance God. They do not interact with each other but run parallelly in their own way. Thus, against dualism and interactionism of substances, Spinoza offers monism (only one substance from which everything follows) and parallelism. Further, conceiving God as all-inclusive whole outside which nothing lies, Spinoza identifies God with Nature. He calls God natura naturata, the total aggregate of all the finite things. Thus, he also advocates pantheism (the reality of a single God permeates and dwells in all things).

In the rationalist tradition, following Spinoza, the concept of substance is discussed by Leibnitz. Against the monism of Spinoza, Leibnitz tries to preserve the individual variety of things without letting them get merged under a single reality. His problem is, "what must be the nature of parts which in some way contain or express the whole within itself?" in search of such a substance Leibnitz moved towards something spiritual. Going against the Cartesian view he firmly rejects the reality of material bodies as substance. The attribute of matter is extension and extension, according to Leibnitz, cannot be in-itself and through itself. Extension presupposes force and it is again divisible into further elements. Hence, it is not substantial. Refuting matter, he approves of the Cartesian concept of self or mind, but with further reinterpretations. Leibnitz claims the necessity of incorporating the unconscious and subconscious mental processes into the essence of mind along with its attribute of consciousness, as these stages also occupy equally significant mental processes. Thus, for Leibnitz reality must be immaterial. He defines substance as indivisible, active and spiritual units called monads.

Emphasising on the principle of individuality Leibnitz insists that reality must be many in number, each being real and eternal. He claims the necessity of the constituent parts in explaining the whole. Refuting the reality of the material atoms proposed by Democritus, Leibnitz clarifies that such constituent parts of the living universe cannot be dead particles of matter like atoms, but conscious agents like our self. Hence, the real particles of the universe must be indivisible, self-active, and spiritual units called monads.

Being active and self-contained each monad stands as a substance and carries the potentiality of the whole universe. Leibnitz calls these monads as windowless units as each monad is self-sufficient and a miniature world in itself. Even being qualitatively different, and windowless, the monads act in a harmonious hierarchical order maintaining harmony in the nature of the universe. What guarantees such harmony? Here, Leibnitz introduces the concept of pre-established harmony introduced by God. According to Leibnitz, God has arranged the monads in such an order that any change in one monad is harmoniously followed by other monads and the universe runs without chaos.

Thus, looking for the necessary truth, the rationalist system ends with the doctrine of substance presented by Leibnitz. We see that even beginning either with matter or with spirit, all the three philosophers end up surrendering to the supremacy of God. Though there is emphasis on the individual facts as well, yet the rationalists have remained away from the ordinary empirical experiences in contemplating over the concept of the fundamental reality of the universe. Here we may look towards the empiricists for their analysis of our ordinary experiences presenting the concept of substance.

10.6. EMPIRICISTS' VIEW

Contrary to the rationalist views the empiricists consider sense experience as the only valid source of knowledge. Their account of substance is also based on the knowledge acquired by sense experience. In the empiricist tradition the concept of substance starts with John Locke. Locke considers the idea of substance as a derivative idea. A substance is the substratum which supports the qualities. According to Locke, what we get from our experience is nothing but the experience of some qualities which he divides as primary and secondary qualities. While the primary qualities like size, shape, weight etc. belong to the object or the material bodies, secondary qualities like colour, taste, smell etc. are said to be belonging to the person experiencing them. But, whenever we come in contact with an

object we experience these simple qualities together. The essential characteristic of the qualities is that they are not self-subsistent. They need a substratum for their existence and that substratum is substance according to Locke. The substratum holds the qualities together.

While defining the nature of substance Locke cannot provide with any specific feature of the substratum. As already stated, the substratum supporting the qualities cannot be experienced directly. Hence, Locke defines it as the unknown substratum, "a supposed I-Know-Not-What". Pertaining to this indefinability Berkeley criticises Locke's substance as a mere abstraction.

The theory of substance in the form of the unknown substratum of qualities leads to David Hume's interpretation of substance. Hume remains sceptical about the existence of any substance. According to him, there is only one thing directly knowable that is impression of certain idea. Real knowledge of something necessarily demands some elements corresponding to some impression of it. Since there is no impression corresponding to the substratum offered by Locke, it is not real. Hume further denies the reality of any material or spiritual substance on the same ground. There is neither any impression of matter nor of self available to our experience. Hence, they stand rejected. According to Hume, there is nothing called substance. Our belief in substance is the result of a mistake or illusion. The concepts called matter, self etc, are nothing but collections of simple ideas, united by imagination, which have a common name assigned to it. Substance and causality are some concepts that are derived from our experience and formed by the law of association and constant conjunction. Kant differs from Hume in regard to the concept of substance and causality. According to Kant substance is not an empirical, but an a priori concept. These a priori concepts make empirical knowledge possible. In his Transcendental Analytic Kant enlists twelve a priori concepts or categories that help in synthesising objective judgements. Kant maintains that an objective empirical judgment is a synthesis of ideas through some pure concepts. Substance, along with other categories serves as such a pure a

priori concept. Substance and causality are considered as the most important categories by Kant as they form the basis of scientific judgement.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Tick the correct one

a) Descartes identifies two/ three substances.

b) Spinoza offers monistic/ pluralistic view of substance.

c) Leibnitz presents the concept of substance in the form of matter/ conscious self.

Q5: State whether the following statements are True or False

a) Monads are passive atoms. (T/F)

b) Mind and body are relative substances according to Descartes. (T/F)

c) Substance is an empirical concept according to Kant. (T/F)

Q6: Mention two differences of Descartes' account of substance from that of Spinoza.

Ans: .....

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10.7. CONTEMPORARY VIEW

Contemporary debate on substance concentrates on the problem of any specific definition of it. Throughout the debate over substance we see that while substance is sometimes defined as an independent entity, sometimes it is defined in terms of its properties. In the contemporary philosophy the problem is about how to specifically define substance against other categories and particular properties. Does substance have any identity independent of properties or is it sufficient to define substance as a mere "bundle of properties? Contemporary philosophers argue around these issues while contemplating over a specific definition of substance.

With different illustrations philosophers like Lowe, Hoffman and Mackie show that substance differs from properties on the basis that while the properties depend on substance for its existence, substance can exist independent of properties. Again a problem arises regarding the nature of this difference. Is it real or superficial? While it is generally said that the difference is real and the concepts like man, horse, cat etc. stand as substances against different properties of man and so on, yet some claim that substances are mere bundles of properties. Following the durability criterion of substance Hoffman claims that compared to any other category or properties substance is more durable. Hence, substance is different from properties. Again maintaining a difference between "thin particulars" and "thick particulars", Armstrong loosely identifies the concept of substance with "thin particulars" and other properties with "thick particulars". "Thin particulars" in his theory share similarity with Lockean substratum or Aristotle's prime matter and do not depend on properties.

Thus, the concept of substance has remained debated till the contemporary analysis. It has not been possible to point out a clear solution to the problem of perceived interdependence between substance and properties. Whether substance is sufficient without properties or is it dependent on them is an issue between the substance theorists and the bundle theorists without any acclaimed solution. Whatever be the arguments, from the history of the debate over substance, one point may be emphasised that the concept demands serious observation as it often clashes with the definitions of identity, essence etc. The Rationalists try to find solution to these issues resting their faith in the supremacy of God in one or the other way. On the other hand the Empiricists argue within the periphery of the perceptible world and offer definition of substance within the modes of the worldly experiences. Thus, even having sceptical lens of Hume, indefinable notions of Locke or the contemporary debate without any reconciliation, substance has remained a serious issue in the philosophical debate and it demands similar in-depth observation in future as well for making sense of the worldly events.



10.8. LET US SUM UP:

In this unit we have discussed the concept of substance as defined by different trends in western philosophy. The following points may help us to make a quick review of the unit.

- In western philosophy Aristotle offers the most influential account of substance.
- Aristotle defined substance as "that which is neither predictable of a subject not present in a subject; for instance, the individual man or horse."
- In Categories, Aristotle provides six senses of substance. Philosophers discussing the concept after Aristotle are influenced by these definitions to a considerable extent.
- In the rationalist trend Descartes defines substance as "that which can exist by itself, without the aid of any other existence." Substance must exist on its own.
- Recognising God, mind and body as substances Descartes advocates dualism and interactionism
- Spinoza recognises God as the only substance and mind and body as two attributes of it. His account results in monism and parallelism.
- Leibnitz considers active conscious monads as substances and preserves the strength of particular constituents of the universe. Each monad is independent and acts in a harmonious order maintain the order of the universe.
- The order is pre-designed by God and it is called pre-established harmony.
- Contrary to the rationalists, the empiricists attempt to bring down the concept to the realm of sense experience.

- Locke defines substance as the substratum supporting the primary and secondary qualities and holding them together.
- Hume denies the reality of any substance and considers the concept like self, matter etc. as collection of simple ideas combined by imagination.
- Kant recognises substance as an a priori concept that helps in synthesising ideas and forming objective judgement.
- In contemporary analysis there is conflict between the views debating over the perceived interdependence between substance and properties.



10.9. FURTHER READINGS

1. Masih, Y. (1994). A Critical History of Western Philosophy. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass
2. Edwards, Paul.(Ed.) (1967). The Encyclopedia of Philosophy.vol. 8. New York: The Macmillan Company & The Free Press.



10. 10. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: "Something that stands under or ground things"

Ans.to Q. No. 2: Categories and Metaphysics Z

Ans.to Q. No. 3: Any individual man, for example "Socrates".

Ans. to Q. No. 4.

a) three

b) monistic

c) conscious self

Ans. to Q. No 5: a) False b) True c) False

Ans. to Q. No. 6. The difference between the Cartesian concept of substance and Spinoza's substance may be stated as the following-

Descartes approves of three substances.....mind, body and God. Maintaining dualism he presents mind and body as two independent substances that do not need one another for existence. Further, he affirms the absolute substantiality of God, who is in Himself and through

Himself. In comparison to God mind and body are relative substances, as they depend on the mercy of God for their occasional interaction. Thus, Descartes advocates dualism and interactionism while analysing substance.

Spinoza rejects Cartesian dualism and holds that mind and body are neither two independent substances nor do they interact with each other. He approves of one single substance, i.e., God and defines mind and body as two co-existent attributes of the single substance God. Being the attributes of God they do not interact but run parallelly in their own way. Thus, Contrary to Cartesian dualism and interactionism of substances, Spinoza advocates monism and parallelism.

10.11. MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very short Questions

Q1: Who offers dualistic view of substance?

Q2: What is the Greek origin of the term substance?

Q3: There is just one substance-that is God. Who says this?

Q4: Substance is the result of a mistake or illusion. Who said this?

Q5: Who offers the notion of pre-established harmony?

B. Short Questions (Write in about 100-150 words)

Q1: What are the essential attributes of mind and body according to Descartes?

Q2: Mention three senses of substance offered by Aristotle?

Q3: What is substance according to Locke?

C. Write short note

a) Pre-established Harmony

b) Interactionism

D. Long Questions (Write in about 300-500 words)

Q1: Explain Aristotle's notion of substance presents in his book Categories.

Q2: Briefly discuss the role of God in the rationalists' account of substance.

Q3: Discuss the contemporary debate on substance.

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