# Substance and substratum transcript

Speaker 1

The idea of substance has a long history in philosophy. Aristotle used the word substance to apply to the most fundamental beings. Things like organisms he thought were natural unities that there were beings which had their own unity and were not just thrown together randomly.

So the word substance here does not mean stuff. As you might say you know tar is a thick sticky substance. It doesn't mean stuff. It means the most fundamental being, and that's what Locke meant by it. But Locke’s understanding was very different from Aristotle.

We can distinguish between a substance and the properties of a substance. An organism might be large. It might have a mass of 200 kilogrammes. Its skin might have a certain colour. It might be furry and so on and all these things are the properties or the qualities of the substance, the organism.

So then you can ask well, what is the substance itself apart from its qualities. Now Aristotle did not ask that question because he thought that the substance was just the being, the organism, the animal.

But Locke thought that qualities were distinct from substances, and you could ask this question, what is the substance itself? But once you strip away all the qualities from the substance, what are you left with?

And thus, when Locke said, what are you left with is: something I know not what? Because he said as soon as you make a claim about it, as soon as you know something about the substance, then that's something about one of its qualities and not about the substance itself. This is a very mysterious idea.

Speaker 2

The nominal essence of gold is that complex idea the word gold stands for. Let it be, for instance, a body yellow of a certain weight, malleable fusible and fixed.

But the real essence is the constitution of the insensible parts of that body on which those qualities and all other properties of gold depend.

Speaker 1

There has to be such a thing or substance because any quality has to be realised or embodied in something.

You can't just have qualities floating around without any underlying basis for those qualities, but that idea of substance is deeply mysterious because it's something that has to be a bearer of qualities. But does not have any qualities in and of itself.

The way out is to reject this idea that substance is something which does not have qualities in itself. That is actually a confused idea because if substance is essentially something which has qualities, then of course it has qualities in itself. It's just we have to distinguish between the essential qualities of a substance and its contingent or accidental qualities.

##

