

24.201 Topics in History of Philosophy: KANT

Substance, Matter, Force

1. *An apparent problem about substance.* Recall that in our discussion of Kant's First Analogy we looked at some different conceptions of substance: the pure concept of a substance, as an absolute subject; the schematized concept of substance, as something that persists through time; and lastly, the concept of something that is conserved. We are leaving behind the last of these, associated with the idea of conservation, but it is time to think about the first two again. Recall that according to van Cleve, Kant is right in thinking that the pure concept and the schematized concept go together: that something could not be an absolute subject without persisting through time. Allison, as we shall see in a moment, also defends the way Kant (as he sees it) brings together the pure and the schematized concepts.

However, on the interpretation that I am suggesting, these two conceptions of substance come apart. Kant's Distinction, or so I have argued, identifies substance with the thing in itself, as a bearer of intrinsic properties. So the question arises: doesn't that conflict with Kant's identification of substance with *phenomenal* substance, in the First Analogy? I want to answer, No.

2. *Two concepts of substance, and the idea of a 'merely comparative' substance*

(i) The pure concept of substance, as an 'absolute subject':

The pure concept [of] substance would mean a something that can be thought only as a subject, never as a predicate of something else. (A147/B186)

(ii) The schematized concept of substance, as the enduring :

The schema of substance is permanence of the real in time, that is, the representation of the real as a substratum of empirical determination of time in general, and so as enduring when all else changes. (A143/B183)

Allison comments on these two ideas, according to which substance is regarded as—

a subject of predication or *bearer of attributes that cannot itself be borne by anything else* [and] as an *enduring substratum of change*. These two characterizations are of course not equivalent....Nevertheless, they can be said to constitute two sides of a conception of substance that is more or less common to the Western philosophical tradition, to which Kant is obviously an heir. Indeed, the subject aspect of the conception is reflected in his *nominal* definition [i.e. pure concept] of substance, and the enduring substratum aspect is reflected in his characterization of the *schema*.¹

Allison sees phenomenal substance as uniting these two ideas; but he is, I think, mistaken. Phenomenal substance is not a 'something that can be thought only as a subject, never as a predicate of anything else'. *What is phenomenal substance?* Kant says it is matter that endures, in the field of appearances, which is *force*: and Kant takes force to be a relation, or relational property.

All that we know in matter is merely relations (what we call its intrinsic properties are intrinsic only in a comparative sense), but *among these relations some are...enduring*. (A285/B341, emphasis added)

¹Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. 214.

Now I want to draw attention to a less well known idea that was prevalent in the metaphysics of Kant's day, which Kant sometimes describes as a merely comparative subject, sometimes with this old Latin label—

(iii) *phaenomenon substantiatum* (literally 'phenomenon made into a substance'), a merely comparative subject.

I can say of anything and everything that it is a substance, in so far as I distinguish it from mere predicates and properties. (A349)

[A] *phenomenon* that is a substratum for other *phenomena* is not thereby a substance, or is only a substance *comparatively* speaking. (R5312)

§193. If accidents are viewed as subsisting in themselves, they are *phaenomena substantiata*. (Baumgarten's *Metaphysics*)

Sometimes we treat something that is not as a substance as if it were a substance, e.g. by ascribing properties to it. We say, e.g. 'Love is blind', or 'the rainbow is bright'. Neither love nor rainbows are substances, but can be treated as subjects of properties. When we do this, what we are considering is a *phaenomenon substantiatum*, a 'merely comparative subject'—something that isn't a substance, but is treated as one.

2. *Question*. Let us think about the relation between these conceptions. Is phenomenal substance, i.e. the enduring, also an absolute subject? That is what most commentators including van Cleve and Allison say. Or is phenomenal substance, i.e. the enduring, a 'merely comparative' subject—something that isn't really a substance, but which we can treat as one? If we look carefully at Kant's works, we find that phenomenal substance is a merely comparative subject. Phenomenal substance is something that is not a substance, that is treated as if it is a substance. Kant says that *bodies* are *phaenomena substantiata*. Here are some illustrative texts, from his *Reflections*, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, and the *First Critique*.

Body is not composed of substances, but is a *phaenomenon substantiatum*.

Bodies are the phenomena of the external presences [i.e. forces] *of...substances*.

Bodies are comparative substances, *substrata phaenomenorum* [substrata of phenomena]. (R4421, R4422, R5294)

Matter is no substance, but only a phenomenon of substance. That which persists in appearance, what lies at the basis of the manifold in bodies, we call substance. We find in bodies substances which we call substances only *per analogiam*.. (*Lectures on Metaphysics*, probably 1778)

If, in thought, we were to take away all compositeness from matter, nothing at all would be left. This does not seem compatible with the concept of a substance, for a substance is really supposed to be the subject of all composition, and ought to remain, as elements, even when the connection in space through which it constitutes a body is taken away. This would be true if we were thinking of a thing in itself, through pure concepts. But it does not hold for what, in the appearance, we call substance. For this is not an absolute subject, but only a *sensible abiding picture* [of an absolute subject]. (A525/B553, emphasis added)

All external appearances are *phenomena substantiata*, for we treat them as substances. (R4494)

Bodies, that is to say, external appearances, are *phaenomena substantiata*, that is to say, enduring substrata of other phenomena. (R4495)

Bodies are *phaenomena substantiata*...because they are external appearances, in which the first subject is absent. (R4699)

In the field of phenomena one can certainly come upon comparative substance, and *phaenomena substantiata*. But one cannot come upon the substances themselves. (R4830)

3. *Conclusion*. Kant's commitment to substance as thing in it self is consistent with a commitment to phenomenal substance as the enduring. The former conforms to the pure concept of an absolute subject; the latter does not, though it is the best we have in the way of an 'empirically serviceable' concept of substance (A349).