



AN

INTRODUCTION

TO

PHILOSOPHY

DANIEL J. SULLIVAN

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SUBSTANCE AND ACCIDENT

Instead of considering beings from the standpoint of their intelligibility, we may consider them in their mode of existence outside our intellects. From this point of view all being is either being which exists on its own, in at least a relatively independent fashion, or else exists in another, in such a way that it has no existence apart from the other. The first way of being is found in such things as a maple tree, a robin, a race horse, a human being – independent centers of existence and activity, beings that go on being what they are behind the restless face of everyday change. These beings are called substances. We may define a substance as *a being whose nature it is to exist in itself*.

The second way of being is called accidental, and it refers to the partial, secondary, surface changes and manifestations of the basic way of being – the green garb of the maple tree, the song of the robin, the speed or the sleekness of the race horse, the health or the wisdom or the cheerfulness of our next-door neighbor. These ways of being could not exist on their own, any more than the grin on the face of the cat can be found apart from the cat. The basic characteristic of these ways of being, then, is that they

depend on some prior being for their existence. We may define an accident therefore as *a being whose nature it is to exist in another*.

The depth to which an accident is rooted in the being of a substance may vary. Thus we could not conceive of a body without dimensions, though other accidents, like the green of a leaf, the quick movements of a bird in flight, the melancholy disposition of a Monday morning, may come and go. Some accidents therefore are called *necessary* and others *contingent*.

THE TRUE AND FALSE VIEW OF SUBSTANCE

Besides the capacity to exist on its own, substance in finite beings manifests a second aspect—it is the ground or support for those dependent ways of being we call accidents. This aspect of substance is not essential, however, since it is not found in God, who is supremely substance.³

The erroneous consideration of substance solely as the support for accidents has led to what we might call the flowerpot view of substance—as though substance were a receptacle into which so many accidents are inserted, like flowers in a pot. Substance on the contrary is the primary being of the thing, and accidents are the secondary ways of being by which substance is manifested to us. Beings as we know them are more or less perfectly realized and change according as their perfection increases or diminishes. Thus they are both being and becoming. The fluctuating, accidental surface manifestations of the being presuppose the underlying consistency, the enduring substance, the being behind the change. Accidents are none other than partial manifestations of substance itself. They are not “secondary beings pasted on like so many parasites,”⁴ but they are the attenuated and diffused being of the substance itself, radiated and refracted in so many partial reflections.

³ For the sense in which substance can be properly predicated of God, see H. Renard, *The Philosophy of Being* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1946), p. 200 ff.; and Henry J. Koren, *Introduction to the Science of Metaphysics* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1955), p. 186.

⁴ A. D. Sertillanges, *Thomas d'Aquin*, I, 76. Quoted by H. Renard, *The Philosophy of Being* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1946), p. 204.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF SUBSTANCE

Substance as such cannot be perceived by our senses: we cannot see it, touch it, imagine it. Our senses do indeed perceive beings which are substances, but it is the color, the taste, the shape of the thing which is known by our senses, not its being or its substance. The existence of substance is known only by an insight of the intellect, which sees that behind the becoming of sense phenomena there exists the being which is the subject of the change. Putting it another way, if all beings are accidents – which alone are directly disclosed to us by our senses – then all beings exist in others, which contradicts the very notion of being. It contradicts too, the evidence of our everyday experience which tells us that there are many independent beings of many kinds. We say therefore that there are as many substances as there are individual beings.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF ACCIDENTS

There are nine classes of accident according to Aristotle, and they can be grouped as follows:

- I. Those characterized by the substance itself in which the accident has its being:
 1. *Quantity* (resulting from the matter of the substance).
 2. *Quality* (issuing from the form of the substance).
 3. *Relation* (ordering the substance to something).
- II. Those characterized by some extrinsic reality which is referred to the subject:
 4. *Time* (the measure of the subject's duration).
 5. *Place* (the measure of extension).
 6. *Posture* (site). (The measure of the disposition of parts.)
- III. As concerned in production, causality, change:
 7. *Action* (characterizing the principle).
 8. *Passion* (characterizing the term).
- IV. As descriptive of exterior appearance:
 9. *Habit* (vesture, ornament).