

# LOCKE ON SUBSTRATUM

## A Deflationary Interpretation

DANIEL Z. KORMAN

### 1. Introduction

Locke tells us in his *Essay*, II. xxiii, that when we encounter some sensible qualities—for instance, the yellowness and heaviness of a piece of gold—we always suppose there is some substratum that supports those qualities. He tells us that we have only an obscure and confused idea of this unknown substratum and that all our ideas of particular substances have this idea, *substratum*, as a part. The substrata to which Locke refers include highly visible and familiar things and stuffs: horses, stones, gold, wax, and snow. The supporting relation that is said to hold between substrata and sensible qualities is the familiar relation of having, or instantiating, which holds between a particular substance and its qualities.

This deflationary interpretation of Locke's remarks about substratum will sound surprising (or perhaps obviously false) to many readers. I believe it is correct and that there is much to be said for it. My aim here, though, is fairly limited. I only wish to introduce the interpretation, defend it against some obvious objections, and demonstrate that it deserves to be taken seriously alongside interpretations on which substrata are bare particulars or real essences. Far more would obviously be required for a complete defence of the interpretation; among other things, one would have to examine the historical context of Locke's remarks, the significance of his decision to use the term 'substratum', and the motivations behind competing interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Broackes (2006: 141) and Pasnau (forthcoming: chapter 9) for deflationist-friendly discussion of some of these issues.

After clarifying some of its key features (§2), I will address the most obvious objection to the interpretation, namely, that it cannot be reconciled with Locke's claim that the idea *substratum* is an obscure, confused idea of we know not what (§3). I then explain how the core of the substratum texts—the opening sections of II. xxiii—are to be understood through the lens of the deflationary interpretation (§4), and I present the main positive support for it, namely, the extensive terminological parallels between Locke's remarks about substrata and his remarks about particular substances (§5). Finally, I address some remaining passages that may look to cause trouble for the deflationary interpretation (§6).

## 2. The Deflationary Interpretation

On the present interpretation, familiar and highly visible things and stuffs are all substrata. When Locke says that there is a substratum that supports some qualities—or when he says that the qualities inhere in a substratum (II. xxiii. 6), or subsist in a substratum (II. xxiii. 1), or coexist in a substratum (IV. vi. 7), or are united in, or belong to, a substratum (II. xxiii. 37)—all that he means, and all that he expects readers to take him to mean, is that there is something that *has* those qualities.<sup>2</sup> Locke, on this interpretation, neither expects nor intends his claim that qualities are supported by substrata to be a matter of controversy. He is not putting forward any substantive thesis about the ontological structure of objects, nor is this intended as a claim about the causal or explanatory source of the superficial features of objects. He is merely making the

<sup>2</sup> Lowe suggests that the deflationary interpretation fails to 'imply that the properties of an object stand in any genuine *relation* to their *substratum*' (2000: 508). But, according to the deflationary interpretation, the substratum stands in the relation of instantiation to its sensible qualities. Perhaps Lowe himself subscribes to a view according to which the instantiation relation is less genuine than other relations. I am not aware of any evidence that Locke shares this view.

mundane point that, in addition to qualities, there are things that have qualities.

Locke distinguishes between particular substances and pure substance in general. On the present interpretation, pure substance in general (aka substratum, aka substance) is not a material object or some stuff. Rather, it is an ontological category, or genus, whose instances are particular substances. Accordingly, the idea of pure substance in general (aka the idea *substance*, aka the idea *substratum*) is an idea of a category—the very category that contemporary philosophers call ‘substance’. Each idea of a particular sort of substance (e.g. the idea *horse*) is likewise an idea of a category whose instances are particular substances (e.g. particular horses). The instances of any particular sort of substance are a subset of the instances of the category substance in general.

By contrast, the relationship between substrata and associated particular substances *themselves* is one of identity, on this interpretation. Locke’s claim that the idea *substratum* is a part of each idea of a particular substance plainly does not entail that substratum (the category) is itself part of each particular substance, just as the fact that the idea *apple* is a proper part of the idea *red apple* does not entail that the apple itself is a proper part of the red apple itself.

The idea *substratum* is a complex idea. Specifically, it is the complex idea *thing that supports accidents*, which results from compounding the idea *thing* and the idea *supports accidents*. In Locke’s own words: ‘it is a complex idea, made up of the general idea of something, or being, with the relation of a support to accidents’.<sup>3</sup>

Locke’s explanation of the acquisition of the idea *thing* runs as follows:

<sup>3</sup> Correspondence with Stillingfleet, First Letter, 19. (*The Works of John Locke*, vol. 3.) Some mistakenly take Locke to have denied that we have the idea *substratum*, on the basis of passages in I. iv. 18, II. xxiii. 2, 4, and 37, in which Locke denies only that we have a *clear and distinct* idea of substratum. Newman (2000: 293–7) argues persuasively for the latter reading of these passages.

The obscure, indistinct, vague idea of thing or something, is all that is left to be the positive idea, which has the relation of a support or substratum to modes or accidents; and that general indetermined idea of something, is, by the abstraction of the mind, derived also from the simple ideas of sensation and reflection.<sup>4</sup>

We are told that the positive idea *thing* is highly obscure and that it is acquired by means of abstraction. In II. xi, Locke explains that the abstract idea *whiteness* is acquired by taking a simple idea of a particular shade of white and making it 'a representative of all of that kind' (II. xi. 9). In the same way, one may abstract further and acquire the abstract idea *colour*, the abstract idea *quality*, or even the perfectly general idea *thing*.<sup>5</sup> 'Thing' is evidently being used in the broad sense in which it applies to entities of any ontological category.<sup>6</sup> In calling the idea *thing* a positive idea, Locke means to contrast it with relative ideas (*husband*, *substratum*, etc.), that is, ideas which have ideas of relations as constituents (II. xxv. 1). The positive idea *thing* applies to everything; the relative idea *substratum* applies only to things that have qualities.

The compound idea *supports accidents* can then be acquired by applying the mental operation of abstraction to any one of our simple ideas of qualities, to acquire the general idea *accident*, and then affixing it to the idea *supports*.<sup>7</sup> How, though, does one acquire

<sup>4</sup> Correspondence with Stillingfleet, First Letter, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Some may take Locke's appeal to abstraction to be illegitimate: for how can a general idea that is abstracted from an idea of a quality apply to something that is not itself a quality? If this is a problem, then it is a problem for abstraction generally. The abstract idea *colour* may be abstracted from a simple idea of a red shade but applies to shades that are not red as well. If this is a problem for Locke's account of abstraction, Locke either did not consider it or else did not take it seriously.

<sup>6</sup> See III. iii. 9 for explicit reference to this broad use of 'thing'.

<sup>7</sup> It may be that the idea *accident* is meant to be a somewhat more complex, relative idea of the form: *quality that is supported*. In that case, one acquires the idea of an accident by affixing the idea of being supported to the abstract idea *quality*.

an idea *supports*? Locke has little to say on the matter. He indicates that he had already shown how ideas of relation ‘are derived from, and ultimately terminate in, ideas of sensation and reflection’,<sup>8</sup> referring the reader to quite general remarks about relation in II. xxv and II. xxviii. 18. But he does not there explain how one is meant to acquire the idea of the supporting relation in particular. Locke later tells us that ‘the mind perceives their [i.e. qualities] necessary connexion with inherence or being supported; which being a relative idea superadded to the red colour in a cherry, or to thinking in a man, the mind frames the correlative idea of a support’.<sup>9</sup> That is, the idea of the supporting relation may be ‘superadded’ to a simple idea of red to get the relative idea *redness that is supported by something* as well as the correlative idea *thing that supports redness*. But, once again, Locke does not explain how, specifically, one acquires the idea of the supporting relation, telling us only that he ‘never denied, that the mind could frame to itself ideas of relation’.<sup>10</sup>

The deflationary interpretation is well-equipped to explain this omission. The fact that Locke explains how one acquires the idea of the supporting relation only by referring readers to his general discussion of ideas of relation suggests that, to Locke’s mind, there is nothing about the acquisition of this idea of relation in particular

<sup>8</sup> Correspondence with Stillingfleet, First Letter, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 21. This is a difficult passage. I take Locke to be saying that one acquires a relative idea *when* the idea of the supporting relation is ‘superadded to the red colour in a cherry’, that is, the relative idea in question is the result of compounding these two ideas. Others take this occurrence of ‘relative idea’ to refer to the idea of the supporting relation itself (e.g. Szabó 2000: 28). But relative ideas need not be ideas of relations; after all, the idea *substratum* is a relative idea (First Letter, 22; cf. II. xxiii. 3), and substrata are not relations. Moreover, Locke explicitly distinguishes between relations and relatives (II. xxv. 1), and calls words like ‘father’ and ‘son’ relative terms (II. xxv. 2), which suggests that relative ideas are not ideas of relations but rather ideas which have ideas of relations as constituents. Cf. Duncan (manuscript).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 21.

that calls for special explanation. Locke evidently expects his readers to be troubled by the idea of supporting only to the extent that they are troubled by ideas of relations generally. If ideas of relations can ever be acquired, one can surely acquire the idea *has*, that is, the idea expressed by the 'is' of predication. Locke no more expects his audience to worry about how one gets the idea *has* than about how one gets the idea *causes* or *is sweeter than*. The deflationary interpretation thus explains both Locke's confidence that the idea *substratum* can be acquired (given the adequacy of his background theory of ideas) and why he takes himself to be in a position to decline to explain how the idea of supporting, in particular, is acquired.

### 3. Obscure, Confused, Unknown, and Uncertain

The idea *substratum* is said to be a confused, obscure idea of we know not what. Despite appearances, the deflationary interpretation is entirely compatible with such remarks. In what follows, I challenge the view that substrata are meant to be unknown in all respects, show that Locke takes particular substances themselves to be unknown, identify the source of the obscurity and confusedness of the idea *substratum*, explain how the idea *substratum* can be obscure while complex ideas of substances are relatively clear, explain the sense in which 'substance' signifies an uncertain supposition, and discuss why Locke seems at times to ridicule the idea *substratum*.

#### 3.1 Ignorance

E. J. Lowe (2005: 70) raises the following objection to the deflationary interpretation:

This, almost certainly, cannot be Locke's own view, not least because he says that substrata are completely *unknown* entities, whereas many of the property-

possessing objects which ... he calls 'particular substances', such as trees and rocks, are far from being completely unknown to us: we know them, according to Locke, precisely inasmuch as we know some of their properties, such as their sensible qualities and their causal powers.

If Lowe is right that, according to Locke, substrata are completely unknown while particular substances are far from being completely unknown, then the deflationary interpretation cannot be correct: substrata cannot be particular substances.

However, Locke never says that substrata are completely unknown or that they are unknown in all respects. What he says is that they are unknown and that we do not know what they are. And there is more than one way of understanding the description of an item as 'unknown' or as a 'know not what'. Walking through the jungle, you might encounter an unknown animal. You do not know what it is. You might observe the animal closely for several minutes, getting a good long look at the colour of its coat and its other observable features. You still do not know what it is. One does not figure out what something is by becoming familiar with its superficial features. That the Lockian substratum is properly characterized as unknown, or as 'we know not what', does not obviously entail that it must be unknown in all respects, and nothing Locke says forces the stronger reading upon us.

Furthermore, although we present-day readers take ourselves to have a great deal of knowledge about particular substances, Locke does not. Indeed, our ignorance with regard to particular substances is a recurring theme in the *Essay*. For instance, after observing that we cannot genuinely sort particular substances—on account of our ignorance with regard to their internal constitutions—Locke has the following to say about our knowledge of the particular substances themselves:

There is not so contemptible a Plant or Animal, that does not confound the most enlarged Understanding. Though the familiar use of Things about us, take off our Wonder; yet it cures not our Ignorance. (III. vi. 9)

Becoming familiar with plants and animals, then, makes them seem less mysterious, but does not cure our ignorance. What Locke seems to have in mind is that we are in precisely the same epistemic situation with respect to familiar particular substances as we are with respect to the unknown jungle animal. After all, if the animal remains unknown after several minutes of close observation, why should hours, days, or even centuries of observing the same features and the same behaviours make any difference? The animal becomes familiar, but it does not become known.

Another illustration: immediately after again calling attention to our ignorance regarding the internal constitutions of particular substances, Locke says the following about our knowledge of those substances:

Herein therefore is founded the *reality* of our Knowledge concerning *Substances*, that all our complex *Ideas* of them must be such, and such only, as are made up of such simple ones, as have been discovered to co-exist in Nature. And our *Ideas* being thus true, though not, perhaps, very exact Copies, are yet the Subjects of *real* (as far as we have any) *Knowledge* of them. Which (as has been already shewed) **will not be found to reach very far....** (IV. iv. 12)<sup>11</sup>

Why does Locke take our 'real knowledge' of particular substances to be so limited, despite our familiarity with them? The reason is that our ideas of particular substances are 'inadequate' (II. xxxi. 7-8, IV. iii. 26). Ideas are adequate only if they perfectly represent those 'archetypes' for which they stand (II. xxxi. 1). But, as we

<sup>11</sup> See also II. xxiii. 32: 'We know nothing beyond our simple *Ideas*. Which we are not at all to wonder at, since we having but some few superficial *Ideas* of things, discovered to us only by the Senses from without ... have no Knowledge beyond that ... being destitute of Faculties to obtain it.'



have just seen, our ideas of substances are not ‘very exact Copies’ of their archetypes, that is, of the sorts of things which they are meant to represent; and one can have real knowledge only if one’s ‘*Ideas* answer their *Archetypes*’ (IV. iv. 8). Locke suggests at one point that our complex ideas of substances would be adequate were they to represent accurately the species, or real essence, of the kind of thing for which they stand (II. xxxi. 6). But the real essence is unknown and, as a result, cannot be accurately represented in our idea of the substance (II. xxxi. 7).<sup>12</sup> Particular substances are unknown—we know not *what* they are, despite our familiarity with their superficial features—because their real essences are unknown.<sup>13</sup>

Lowe is right that we know particular substances precisely inasmuch as we know some of their qualities. But we know them *only* to that extent. Gold (for instance) may be familiar and easily recognizable, but we do not know what it is until we know the real essence of gold. I know of no clear textual support that Locke takes particular substances to be any better known than substrata.

### 3.2 *Confusedness and Obscurity*

Why is the idea *substratum* said to be confused (e.g. at II. xii. 6, II. xiii. 19, II. xxiii. 3)? An idea is confused to the extent that it lacks distinctness. Locke explains that:

<sup>12</sup> Locke also mentions a second way in which complex ideas of substances might have been adequate: they might have included simple ideas of every single quality of the relevant kind of object. But they do not; instead, our ideas of substances include only an arbitrary handful of qualities, which have no special ‘right to be put in’ (II. xxxi. 8).

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that, like the substratum, the real essences of substances are said to be know not whats (III. vi. 43). This has led some to suggest that Locke ‘teaches a twofold ignorance’. (See, e.g. Pringle-Pattison (1924: 233 n.) and Ayers (1975: 17).) The deflationary interpretation is able to provide a unified explanation of our ignorance concerning substrata and real essences without identifying the two: substrata are unknown *because* their real essences are unknown,

when a Man designs, by any Name, a sort of Things, or any one particular Thing, distinct from all others, the complex *Idea* he annexes to that Name, is the more distinct, the more particular the *Ideas* are, and the greater and more determinate the number and order of [*Ideas*] is, whereof it is made up. (II. xxix. 10)

Locke identifies two marks of distinctness here, and the idea *substratum* falls short of both of them. First, the distinctness of an idea is said to be determined in part by the number of *particular* (i.e. non-abstract) ideas of which it is made. But two of the three constituents of the idea *substratum*—*thing* and *accident*—are highly abstract ideas. Second, the distinctness of an idea is said to be determined in part by the number of ideas of which it is made. But the idea *substratum* has only three constituents: the idea *thing*, the idea *supports*, and the idea *accidents*. The explanation of the confusedness of the idea *substratum* is therefore entirely compatible with the claim that highly visible things and stuffs are substrata.

Why is the idea *substratum* obscure? Obscure ideas are ideas that are not clear. Clear ideas come in two varieties, simple and complex. Locke tells us that simple ideas are clear ‘when they are such as the Objects themselves’, that is, to the extent that they accurately represent the items for which they stand (II. xxix. 2). Complex ideas are clear to the extent that they are composed of clear simple ideas. But the idea *substratum* is neither a clear simple idea nor a complex idea whose constituents are clear. The idea *substratum* has three constituents, none of which is a clear simple idea of sensation or reflection, and two of which (*thing* and *accident*) are highly abstract ideas that are not ‘very exact Copies’ of anything in particular. This is why the idea *substratum* is obscure and, as with its confusedness, the explanation of its obscurity is entirely compatible with the deflationary interpretation.

One thing that may look to cause trouble for the deflationary interpretation is that, according to Locke, complex ideas of particular substances are often quite clear. Locke observes that jewellers

have a particularly clear idea of diamonds given their special familiarity with the qualities of diamonds (II. xxiii. 3). Some might complain that this creates a problem for the deflationary interpretation: for if substrata are substances, then it cannot both be the case that our complex ideas of substances are clear and that our idea *substratum* is unclear.

The complaint is misguided. Complex ideas of substances always include a number of clear constituent ideas which mitigate their obscurity. For instance, the complex idea of gold is the idea *substratum of yellowness, great weight, ductility, fusibility*, etc. To the extent that one has clear ideas of the indicated qualities of gold, one has a clear complex idea of gold. The more clear ideas of qualities are included in a complex idea, the clearer the complex idea itself. Complex ideas of substances can never be entirely clear, since each has the obscure idea *substratum* as a constituent (II. xii. 6). But the various clear constituents of complex ideas of substances mitigate their obscurity. The idea *substratum*, by contrast, has no clear constituent ideas of qualities to mitigate its obscurity; it is just the idea *thing that supports qualities*. (NB this is not to say that substrata themselves lack sensible qualities or that they are themselves constituents of particular substances.)

### 3.3 *Uncertain Supposition*

Locke tells us that 'Substance' signifies 'an uncertain supposition of we know not what' (I. iv. 18). Why 'uncertain'? One of the main sources of uncertainty about the signification of a word, according to Locke, is that 'the signification of the Word is referred to a Standard, which Standard is not easy to be known' (III. ix. 5). The word 'substance' is meant to stand for an idea of objects whose nature (i.e. real constitution), is 'utterly unknown to us' (III. ix. 12). This is why the signification of 'substance' is uncertain.

It is less clear what Locke has in mind in referring to substratum as a 'supposition'.<sup>14</sup> Here is a suggestion: Locke holds that substrata are merely supposed to exist because one is never immediately aware of the substance that has the qualities that one perceives. After all, the only ideas that one receives directly from 'exteriour things' are ideas of their sensible qualities (II. xxiii. 1). Here Locke is in agreement with Descartes, who held that although we are inclined to think that we perceive the wax itself, in truth we perceive only the colour, shape, and other qualities of the wax and then suppose that there is some item before us that has these qualities (CSM 21). Strictly speaking, we do not see substances; we see their qualities and then suppose, on that basis, that they exist.

### 3.4 *Ridicule*

At some points, Locke seems to be ridiculing the idea *substratum*. For instance, he compares one who speaks of a substratum in which qualities inhere to the Indian philosopher who postulates an elephant to hold up the world, a tortoise to hold up the elephant, and something he knows not what to hold up the tortoise (II. xiii. 19–20, II. xxiii. 2). Some may think that this poses a problem for the deflationary interpretation, for why would Locke ridicule the idea *substratum* in this way if it were just the perfectly familiar idea of a substance?

Locke is not ridiculing the idea *substratum*. He is ridiculing those *philosophers* who take this idea—the ordinary, familiar idea of a substance—to be clear and distinct.<sup>15</sup> Locke's project in Book II of the *Essay* is to explain how all of one's ideas can be derived from sensation and reflection and a handful of operations of the mind (compounding, comparing, and abstracting). Locke of course

<sup>14</sup> See Szabó (2000) for an interesting take on supposition.

<sup>15</sup> In his own words: 'those passages were not intended to ridicule the notion of substance' (Correspondence with Stillingfleet, Second Reply, 448). See McCann (2007: 159) on the sincerity of Locke's reply to Stillingfleet.

acknowledges that we have the idea of a substance (as in: 'gold is a yellow substance'), and he is confident that his theory of ideas has the resources to account for the acquisition of this idea. We get the idea *thing* and the idea *accident* by abstraction, we get the idea *supports* by means of comparison, and we compound them to form the idea *substratum*.

However, Locke also recognizes that his theory of ideas cannot deliver any *clear and distinct* idea of substance. So if Descartes is right that we do have a clear and distinct idea of substance, then there is at least one idea that Locke's theory cannot account for. When he seems to be ridiculing the idea *substratum*, Locke is replying to this objection. He denies that we have a clear and distinct idea of substance, and he thinks that this is obvious once one sets aside the qualities that substances support and tries to say something about substance itself. Like a child, or like the poor Indian philosopher, one finds that one can say only that it is something; and Locke takes this as evidence that we have only an impoverished conception of the category substance.<sup>16</sup> Locke's ridicule is meant to serve as an invitation, first, to philosophers in the scholastic and Cartesian traditions to say more about their allegedly clear idea of substance than that it is an idea of something, and second, to his more theoretically innocent readers to see for themselves that, although they do have an idea of substance, it is by no means a clear idea.<sup>17</sup> If Locke is right about this, then it is no shortcoming of his theory of ideas that it cannot deliver a clear idea of substance. It is enough that it delivers an obscure and confused idea of substance because that, Locke argues, is the only idea of substance we have.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Correspondence with Stillingfleet, Second Reply: 'To show a blind man that he has no clear and distinct idea of scarlet, I tell him, that his notion of it, that it is a thing or being, does not prove he has any clear or distinct idea of it; but barely that he takes it to be something, he knows not what' (450).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Newman (2000: 295).

#### 4. Substratum in Context

Now that we have seen how the deflationary interpretation may be reconciled with Locke's contention that the idea *substratum* is an obscure and confused idea of we know not what, let us consider how the core of Locke's discussion of substratum—the opening sections of chapter II. xxiii—is to be understood through the lens of the deflationary interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

In the opening section of the chapter, Locke is preparing his reader for his suggestion that ideas of particular substances are complex, not simple, and diagnoses the tendency to think otherwise as resulting from illicitly though inadvertently moving from the relative simplicity of our *terms* for particular substances (e.g. 'the wax') to the simplicity of the *ideas* for which they stand. He thereby hopes to head off the objection that his theory of ideas cannot account for our (allegedly) simple ideas of particular substances by debunking one potential reason for supposing that we have simple ideas of particular substances in the first place.

In II. xxiii. 2, he anticipates and combats the objection that we have a clear idea which his theory cannot deliver, namely, a clear idea of the category substance. He does so by pointing out that any attempt to articulate this idea will illicitly invoke ideas of qualities such as solidity, which are not themselves part of the idea *substance*, but are rather conjoined to the idea *substance* to form ideas of particular substances. He thereby heads off the objection that his theory of ideas cannot deliver our (allegedly) clear idea *substance*, by denying that the idea is clear and contending that the fact that we have clear ideas of the qualities of substances is not a ground for supposing we have a clear idea of the category substance itself.

In II. xxiii. 3, he explains why ideas of particular substances seem so clear, despite the fact that the idea *substance* is itself so

<sup>18</sup> For a far more thorough, deflationist-friendly textual analysis of II. xxiii. 1–6, see Pasnau (forthcoming, chapter 9).

unclear. The reason is that ideas of particular substances are highly complex and are almost entirely composed of simple ideas of qualities, which are themselves clear. We therefore need not suppose that the idea *substance* is clear in order to account for the relative clarity of complex ideas of particular substances; their other constituent ideas are the source of their clarity. He thereby heads off the objection that, because ideas of particular substances are clear, we must therefore have a clear idea *substance* which his theory of ideas cannot deliver.

## 5. Terminological Parallels

My project so far has been almost entirely defensive, and I have said little about why one should *accept* the deflationary interpretation. The main reason to accept it is that there are extensive terminological parallels between Locke's remarks about substrata and his remarks about particular substances.

For instance, Locke sometimes uses the word 'substance' interchangeably with 'substratum' (I. iv. 18, II. xxiii. 1) and sometimes uses 'substance' to designate a category that includes particular substances like horses (II. xxiii. 3) and wax (II. xxvi. 1). If the deflationary interpretation is correct, then these uses of 'substance' are univocal and one would expect him to have announced that he is using 'substratum' to refer to what we ordinarily call 'substance'. And he did, repeatedly. When Locke first mentions substratum (I. iv. 18), he says that *we* signify nothing by *our* word 'substance' but an unknown substratum. He tells us at II. xxiii. 1 that we suppose that there is a substratum in which sensible qualities exist 'which therefore we call *Substance*' and, again, at IV. vi. 7, that qualities co-exist in a substratum 'which we call *Substance*'. Taking these passages at face value, we find Locke telling the reader that

what he means by 'substratum' is just what we, in ordinary speech, mean by 'substance' (as in: 'gold is a yellow, malleable substance').

Locke's use of 'substance' to designate both substrata and particular substances is only one of a great many terminological parallels between Locke's discussion of substratum and his discussion of particular substances:

- *Subjects*. Locke sometimes refers to the substratum of some qualities as a subject (II. xxiii. 4, II. xxiii. 6) and elsewhere refers to snowballs and other things that have qualities as subjects (II. viii. 8, IV. iii. 15).
- *Independence*. The substratum ('that unknown common Subject') is something that 'inheres not in any thing else' (II. xxiii. 6) and particular substances are characterized as 'subsisting by themselves' (II. xii. 6).
- *Subsistence*. Locke speaks of qualities as subsisting in the substratum (II. xxiii. 1) and elsewhere speaks of the 'something' in which qualities subsist as having those qualities (II. xxiii. 3).
- *Inherence*. Qualities are said to inhere in the substratum (II. xxiii. 6) and are also said to inhere in bodies (II. xxiii. 30).
- *Co-existence*. Sensible qualities are observed to co-exist in an unknown substratum (IV. vi. 7) and are also found to co-exist in particular substances (II. xxxi. 8, III. ix. 13).
- *Unity*. Qualities are united in a substratum (II. xxiii. 37) and qualities are united in horses, stones, and pieces of gold (II. xxiii. 4, IV. iii. 14).
- *Belonging*. Qualities are said to belong to the 'supposed something [of which] we have no clear distinct *Idea*' (II. xxiii. 37), and the colour yellow is said to belong to gold (III. xi. 21).

The deflationary interpretation supplies a straightforward account of these terminological parallels: it is the same kind of thing that, in all cases, is said to be a substance, a substratum, a subject, a support, that is said to subsist by itself and inhere in nothing else,



and that is said to be that to which qualities belong and in which they inhere, subsist, co-exist, and are united. I know of no discussion of these extensive terminological parallels in the literature on the substratum texts, and it would be interesting to see whether competing interpretations can explain them in any satisfactory way.

## 6. Remaining Worries

In §3, I addressed the most obvious and serious objection to the deflationary interpretation. Let us now consider four further worries that one might have about the interpretation.

(1) The following passage may seem to be in tension with the deflationary interpretation:<sup>19</sup>

Thus if to Substance be joined the simple *Idea* of a certain dull whitish colour, with certain degrees of Weight, Hardness, Ductility, and Fusibility, we have the *Idea* of *Lead*. (II. xii. 6)

On one reading of this passage, Locke (as he is sometimes wont to do) is using 'ideas' to mean qualities, and is speaking of joining qualities to some qualityless substance to get lead. This reading would require us to distinguish between particular substances (in this case, lead) and the item being referred to here as 'Substance'.

But the far more natural reading of this passage takes Locke to be speaking only of adding ideas of the qualities of lead to the idea *substance* to get the idea *lead*. Locke says that the process of joining these items yields 'the *Idea* of *Lead*', not that it yields lead itself; and though Locke sometimes loosely refers to qualities as 'ideas', he never to my knowledge refers to substances as 'ideas'. Furthermore, in the preceding sentence ('The *Ideas* of *Substances* are such combinations of simple *Ideas* ... in which the supposed, or

<sup>19</sup> See Alexander (1981: 4).

confused *Idea* of Substance, such as it is, is always the first and chief'), Locke is plainly talking about joining ideas of qualities to the idea *substance* to get complex ideas of substances. It would be a non sequitur for him then to start talking about the ontological structure of lead. More plausibly, he is using the complex idea of lead as an illustration of how ideas of qualities are joined to the idea *substance* to yield complex ideas of substances.

(2) We are told that 'the Substance is supposed always *something* besides the Extension, Figure, Solidity, Motion, Thinking, or other observable *Ideas*' (II. xxiii. 3). Such passages might lead one to believe that the substratum is not the whole individual but rather the 'ingredient' or 'constituent' of that individual that is left over once one has 'subtracted' all of the properties of the thing. But that the substance is something distinct from (or 'besides') the qualities that it supports plainly does not entail that the substratum has no qualities. A stone is not identical to its shape, but that does not mean that it has no shape.<sup>20</sup>

(3) The postulation of bare particulars threatens to give rise to a vicious regress.<sup>21</sup> Some may read Locke as alluding to just such a regress when he compares our reasoning about substance to that of the Indian philosopher who claimed that the world is supported by an elephant; the elephant, by a tortoise; and the tortoise, by 'something, he knew not what' (II. xxiii. 2). On that reading, Locke's claim is that, just as anything that holds up the world must itself be held up (and so on *ad infinitum*), qualities must always be supported by some substratum which itself has qualities themselves in need of a support (and so on *ad infinitum*).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> McCann observes that the conception of a substratum as the ingredient of a substance that remains after the subtraction of its qualities 'does not fit any text anywhere in Locke' (2001: 96).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Lowe (2005: 69).

<sup>22</sup> Berkeley's well-known regress objection against substratum may likewise have led some to associate the Lockian substratum with a bare-particular-style regress. I doubt that

But this cannot be what Locke has in mind. If Locke truly were postulating bare particulars and alluding to the threat of regress in the opening sections of II. xxiii, it would be wholly inexplicable why he does not attempt to block the regress objection. It would be one thing if Locke wanted to deny the existence of substrata; but, as is quite clear from his response to Stillingfleet, this was never his intention.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Locke's own explanation of his intention in this passage makes no reference to any regress.<sup>24</sup>

The Indian is being accused, not of setting off a vicious regress but, rather, of *postponing the question*. Consider the larger context in which this passage appears. Locke contends in II. xxiii. 2 that one's idea *substance* is no more than an idea of a 'he knows not what support of ... Qualities'. All one can say when asked about the subject in which colour and weight inhere is that they inhere in the object's 'solid extended parts'. But this response is unsatisfactory: 'if he were demanded, what is it, that that Solidity and Extension inhere in, he would not be in a much better case, than the *Indian* before mentioned'. The response that it is the solid, extended parts of the subject that support its qualities is unsatisfactory because it only temporarily dodges the question at issue. For what are these things that support the solidity and extension? The solid-parts

this is the regress that Berkeley had in mind. Berkeley's argument is better understood not as an astute argument against bare particulars but rather as a sophistical argument against our ordinary notion of substances. The extension of the original object is portrayed as something resting on top of the substratum and, since nothing can rest on something unextended, the underlying support must itself be extended; and that which rests on the substratum must be extended as well, so there is now an additional extension that must be accounted for, itself in need of support, and so on *ad infinitum* (*Dialogues*, 136–7). But this metaphorical language of 'resting upon' is a thin disguise for the nonsensical premise that an object's extension must be distinct from the extension that it supports (i.e. has). The error is Berkeley's, not Locke's.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Alexander (1980: 102–3), Szabó (2000: 19), and McCann (2007: 170–4).

<sup>24</sup> Locke's explanation appears in the Correspondence with Stillingfleet, Second Reply, 448.

answer only postpones having to admit that the ultimate support is 'something, we know not what', just as the Indian who claims that an elephant supports the world only postpones having to admit his ignorance about that which *ultimately* holds up the world.<sup>25</sup> Thus the analogy to the Indian philosopher does not support the claim that Locke has in mind bare particulars and the associated regress in the substratum texts.

(4) There are a handful of passages in the *Essay* in which Locke seems to suggest that the substratum is *causally* responsible for the presence and co-existence of the qualities that it supports. These passages pose a prima facie threat to the deflationary interpretation, for on this interpretation the relation that obtains between a thing and its qualities (i.e. instantiation) is not a causal relation.

The first passage in which Locke uses causal language in connection with the substratum appears at the end of II. xxiii. 1:

Because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple *Ideas* can subsist by themselves, we accustom our selves, to suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *Substance*.

The 'they' in 'from which do they result' refers back to *these simple ideas*; but, as indicated above, Locke sometimes uses 'ideas' to refer to qualities.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, he clearly has in mind qualities when he says at the beginning of this passage that we are unable to imagine 'simple ideas' subsisting by themselves. So there is pressure to read Locke as saying that *qualities* result from the

<sup>25</sup> That this is the point of the analogy becomes still more evident when Locke immediately goes on to raise a second analogy, this time to ignorant children (II. xxiii. 2). The point is that, just as the child can say nothing more about an unfamiliar object than that it is a thing, all that one is able to say about the substratum that supports the qualities given in perception is that it is a thing.

<sup>26</sup> See especially II. viii. 8.

substratum and that the relationship between qualities and substrata is causal.

I deny that Locke is saying that qualities result from the substratum. Locke's use of 'they' is equivocal: while the first occurrence of 'they' ('wherein they do subsist') refers to qualities, the second occurrence of 'they' ('from which they do result') refers to ideas of those qualities.<sup>27</sup> While this may at first seem ad hoc, notice that Locke is uncontroversially guilty of exactly this sort of equivocation at the beginning of the section in question: 'The Mind being ... furnished with a great number of the simple *Ideas*, conveyed in by the *Senses*, as they are found in exterior things...'. The apparent referent of 'they' in 'they are found in exterior things' is the *great number of the simple Ideas*. These ideas are said to furnish the mind, so clearly Locke intends 'ideas' here to mean ideas, not qualities. Must we therefore conclude that 'they' refers to ideas, and that Locke takes ideas in the mind themselves to be 'found in exterior things'? Of course not. It is the qualities that produce these ideas that are found in exterior things. The 'from which they do result' passage appears to be just one more instance of this sort of grammatical slip.

The opening lines of II. xxiii. 2 provide still further support for reading Locke as saying that ideas (as opposed to qualities) result from the substratum. For here, immediately following the passage under consideration, Locke says:

So that if any one will examine himself concerning his *Notion of pure Substance in general*, he will find he has no other *Idea* of it at all, but only a Supposition of he knows not what support of such Qualities, which are capable of **producing** simple *Ideas* in us.

<sup>27</sup> See Bennett (1987: 212–13) for an alternative deflationist-friendly reading of this passage.

The 'So' at the beginning of this passage indicates that the fact that one's idea of substance consists of a supposition of a support of qualities that produce ideas in our minds is meant to follow from what had just been said, which was that, in acquiring this idea, we 'suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result'. The alleged entailment does not hold if 'from which they do result' is understood to mean 'from which qualities result'. It holds only if, as I have suggested, 'from which they do result' is understood to mean 'from which our simple ideas result'.<sup>28</sup> So there is independent reason to prefer the deflationist-friendly reading of 'from which they do result'.

The only other passages in which Locke uses causal language to characterize the relationship between substrata and the qualities that they support occur in II. xxiii. 6 and III. vi. 21, where Locke refers to substrata as the 'Cause of the Union' of various simple ideas. Even supposing (as seems plausible) that Locke means qualities by 'ideas' here, there is a natural reading of these passages that is entirely compatible with the deflationary interpretation. As Bennett observes, the substratum is 'a holder-together, a unifier of ideas or qualities, and that seems to imply that it *causes* their unity' (1987: 212). In other words, Locke is saying only that the reason that the qualities are clustered together in a single location is that they are all instantiated by one and the same thing.

## 7. Conclusion

I have defended an interpretation of the substratum texts on which the substratum that supports the sensible qualities of a particular substance is the particular substance itself. There is nowhere in the

<sup>28</sup> More cautiously, the entailment holds if one additionally (and quite naturally) supposes that those simple ideas that one acquires upon perceiving a substance are produced by the qualities of that substance.

entirety of the *Essay*, or in the subsequent correspondence with Stillingfleet, in which Locke explicitly says that (or says anything that entails that) substrata are anything other than highly visible, familiar ordinary objects. I challenge those who seem to recall some such passage to find it.

We have seen that Locke's claim that the idea *substratum* is a confused, obscure, uncertain supposition of we know not what is compatible with the deflationary interpretation. Moreover, the terminological parallels between Locke's remarks about substratum and his remarks about particular substances tell strongly in favour of the deflationary interpretation. But perhaps the most compelling evidence for the deflationary interpretation is that, in reading the substratum texts through the lens of this interpretation, one does not find surprising and undefended metaphysical posits, a disorienting fluctuation between fundamentally different uses of 'substance' and related expressions, or a 'doubleness of attitude' unmatched in the writings of any philosopher.<sup>29</sup> Instead, one finds the reasonable and even predictable remarks of a philosopher of mind who, having abandoned the nativist theory of ideas, is trying to account for the source of our perfectly ordinary, perfectly familiar ideas of substance and of substances.<sup>30</sup>

*The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

<sup>29</sup> Bennett (1987: 197).

<sup>30</sup> Many thanks to Mike Allers, Devon Belcher, Bob Hanna, Dave Robb, Matthew Stuart, and Ken Winkler for valuable discussion. I received a number of insightful suggestions and objections at the 2010 Margaret Dauler Wilson conference—particularly from Dan Kaufman, Sam Levey, Antonia Lolordo, and Lewis Powell—which I hope to address in future work. I am especially grateful to Bob Pasnau for comments on multiple drafts of the paper and many illuminating discussions of the substratum texts, to Shelley Weinberg for her guidance on Locke's view of knowledge, and to Dan Kaufman for some invaluable advice.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, Peter (1980), 'Locke on Substance in General: Part I', *Ratio*, 22: 91–105.
- Alexander, Peter (1981), 'Locke on Substance in General: Part II', *Ratio*, 23: 1–19.
- Ayers, M. R. (1975), 'The Ideas of Power and Substance in Locke's Philosophy', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 25: 1–27.
- Bennett, Jonathan (1987), 'Substratum', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 4: 197–215.
- Berkeley, George (1996), *Principles of Human Knowledge; and, Three Dialogues* (Oxford: OUP).
- Broackes, Justin (2006), 'Substance', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 106: 131–66.
- Descartes, René (1984), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, eds. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: CUP).
- Duncan, Stewart (manuscript), 'Locke, Relative Ideas, and Substance in General'.
- Locke, John (1823), *The Works of John Locke*, vol. 3 (London: Routledge).
- Locke, John (1975), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Lowe, E. J. (2000), 'Locke, Martin, and Substance', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 50: 499–514.
- Lowe, E. J. (2005), *Locke* (New York: Routledge).
- McCann, Edwin (2001), 'Locke's Theory of Substance Under Attack!', *Philosophical Studies*, 106: 87–105.
- McCann, Edwin (2007), 'Locke on Substance', in Lex Newman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding'* (New York: CUP), 157–91.
- Newman, Lex (2000), 'Locke on the Idea of Substratum', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 81: 291–324.
- Pasnau, Robert (forthcoming), *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1689* (OUP).
- Pringle-Pattison, A. S. (1924), *Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Szabó, Zoltán Gendler (2000), 'Locke on Supposing a Substratum', *The Locke Newsletter*, 31: 11–42.