

Locke on the Idea of Substratum ¹

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There are notorious problems in Locke's treatment of the idea of *substratum* -- or, as he often puts it, the idea of "substance-in-general". It is clear he accords a central role to collections of simple ideas. For instance, the complex idea of a particular cherry includes the component, simple ideas of its red color, round shape, sweet smell, and so on. Having had multiple such ideas (e.g., of more particular cherries), the mind forms abstract ideas of such collections. These abstract ideas provide the essences -- *nominal* essences -- by which we sort the world of experience into various kinds of things/substances (cf. III.iii.15, III.vi.7ff).² There is indeed general agreement that for Locke our complex ideas of substances consist of -- at least -- such collections of simple ideas. But do these collections of simple ideas exhaust our complex ideas of substances?

Interpretive difficulties emerge at this juncture. There's no disputing that Locke *says* plenty about a further ideational component -- a supposed substratum he sometimes characterizes as a we-know-not-what-*support* for sensible qualities. Never mind that he employs (perhaps ridicules) the *jargon* of substratum. Does he countenance any such *idea*? If so, what does he take it to be an idea *of*, and what does he take to be its empirical ground? Or does he instead think "we talk like children" when using such words? These are the questions with which the present paper is concerned.

My aim is fundamentally interpretive: viz., to render consistent the seemingly divergent strands in Locke's various treatments of substratum. This is an ambitious project, given the apparent duplicity of his various claims on the subject. Jonathan Bennett has remarked that "nothing else in the writings of any philosopher matches the doubleness of attitude of the passages about substratum in Locke's *Essay*" (1987, 197). I aim to show that the duplicity is *merely* apparent. The paper is organized around three aspects of apparent duplicity.

In Section 1, I address an apparent *textual* duplicity arising in the *Essay*. Locke might seem, at once, to embrace and to reject the theory of substratum. As Michael Ayers notes, there is "room

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² All references to the *Essay* are to the Nidditch (1975) version.

for disagreement over whether Locke is advancing a theory of *substratum* or attacking it, being serious or being ironical" (1977, 78). As I argue, close inspection of the relevant texts reveals that Locke's seemingly divergent claims (in the *Essay*) are compatible: they are aimed at different philosophical positions on substratum. The texts indeed suggest that he countenances an idea of substratum, albeit an obscure one.

In Section 2, I address an apparent *doctrinal* duplicity that arises in connection with efforts to understand Locke as countenancing an idea of substratum. As many commentators have maintained, Locke's theory of ideas does not avail him of any such idea,³ a fact that Locke may look expressly to concede.⁴ I argue that Locke does *not* concede this, nor does the obscure idea of substratum that he countenances run afoul of the theory of ideas (as *he* understands it). I attribute to him a *custom*-grounded account whereby an obscure notion of substratum derives largely from the customary experience of simple ideas that "go constantly together". One result of the account is to leave Locke sceptical of the *being* of the supposed substratum,⁵ sceptical enough to be agnostic as to its nature. This result obviates much of what Ayers calls the "the crucial problem of interpretation" (1991, 32): this crucial problem concerns the nature of substratum, a problem that shapes the two leading interpretations -- the substrata are *real essences* interpretation,⁶ and the substrata are *bare particulars* interpretation.⁷ If the case for a custom interpretation is as attractive as I hope to show, it is natural to ask why it has not been embraced in the literature:⁸ Why, e.g., do the two leading interpretive camps agree in rejecting it? Such questions bring us to a third aspect of seeming duplicity.

In Section 3, I again address an apparent *textual* duplicity. The problem texts arise in the Stillingfleet exchange. There *are* custom-suggestive passages in the *Essay*. The letters to Stillingfleet, however, have been widely thought to clarify in no uncertain terms that Locke means to ground the idea of substratum in *reason* rather than custom.⁹ The relevant secondary literature

³ Cf. Loeb (1981, 81), Bolton (1976, 502), Mabbot (1973, 31), Yolton (1956, 136), and O'Connor (1952, 83).

⁴ Cf. Bolton (1976, 502) and Mabbott (1973, 31).

⁵ As Locke writes to Stillingfleet: "I ground not the being, but the idea of substance, on our accustoming ourselves to suppose some substratum; for it is of the idea alone I speak there, and not of the being of substance." (W 4:18)

⁶ Yolton defends this interpretation (1970, 43ff). Ayers' writings also provide much detail (cf. his 1977, 1991, and 1998), though there is some dispute as to whether he endorses the account (cf. McCann 1994, 88 note 13). There are variants of the interpretation. On one account, substrata are *specific* real essences. Alexander holds instead that they are *general* essences -- there being one kind of substratum for mind, another kind for body (1985, 224).

⁷ Bennett has been among the most outspoken advocates of this interpretation (cf. his 1968 and 1987).

⁸ Aaron does come close to attributing a custom account to Locke (cf. his 1937, 175ff).

⁹ Cf. Ayers (1977, 87), Mackie (1976, 80), Mabbott (1973, 30ff), Gibson (1968, ch. 5), and Fraser (1959, II.xxiii.1). Some argue that the grounding reason is intended to establish the logical necessity of substratum; cf. Alexander (1985, 209) and O'Connor (1952, 80).

exhibits insufficient attention to Locke's persisting affirmations (to Stillingfleet) of an integral role for custom and supposition -- affirmations that urge a reexamination of his allegedly anti-custom claims. I provide a reexamination of the texts and argue that Locke does not disavow a custom account. His remarks to Stillingfleet are indeed consistent with the custom interpretation I propose in Section 2.

1. The first aspect of apparent duplicity: eliminativism vs. retentionism

It has occurred to many readers of the *Essay* that Locke means to deny that we have any idea of substratum.¹⁰ In some passages he is undeniably sarcastic, seeming even to write with contempt. There are indeed texts in which he might appear to recommend an *eliminativist* stance on the alleged idea of substratum: we have no "*Idea* of that *thing* we suppose a Support" (II.xxiii.4) -- no idea "at all" (II.xxiii.37). A host of passages can be read in this eliminativist vein, including:

I confess, there is another *Idea*, which would be of general use for Mankind to have, as it is of general talk as if they had it; and that is the *Idea of substance*, which we neither have, nor can have, by *Sensation* or *Reflection*. (I.iv.18)

But were the Latin words *inhærentia* and *Substantia*, put into the plain English ones that answer them, and were called *Sticking on* and *Under-propping*, they would better discover to us the very great clearness there is in the Doctrine of *Substance and Accidents*, and shew of what use they are in deciding of Questions in Philosophy. (II.xiii.20)

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 ... And thus here, as in all other cases, where we use Words without having clear and distinct *Ideas*, we talk like Children ... (II.xxiii.2)

In contrast with these texts, there are passages in which Locke presents a very different, *retentionist* face, appearing to recommend an account of substratum. Various of his remarks can be read as asserting the *inconceivability* of qualities absent a supporting substrate: we arrive at the idea of substratum "because we cannot conceive, how they [qualities] should subsist alone" (II.xxiii.4). Some of these retentionist passages suggest that the idea of substratum is somehow fundamental to experience:

[T]he Ideas of Substances are such combinations of simple Ideas, as are taken to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves; in which the supposed, or confused Idea of Substance, such as it is, *is always the first and chief*. (II.xii.6; my italics)

... we must take notice, that our complex Ideas of Substances, besides all these simple Ideas they are made up of, *have always* the confused Idea of something to which they belong, and in which they subsist ... (II.xxiii.3; my italics)

¹⁰ Of course, Locke allows that we may have the idea of a *word* (e.g., 'substratum') and the contexts in which it is used, even if we lack any such *idea* as the word is purported to signify (cf. II.xxxi.6).

The Essence of any thing, in respect of us, is the whole complex Idea, comprehended and marked by that Name; and in Substances, besides the several distinct simple Ideas that make them up, the confused one of Substance, or of an unknown Support and Cause of their Union, *is always a part ...* (III.vi.21; my italics)

These seemingly divergent strands have divided interpreters.¹¹ As Edwin McCann writes: in the one set of texts, Locke treats the idea of substratum "in terms so sharp and sarcastic as to raise the question whether he thinks there could be anything to the idea at all"; in the other, he seems not only to articulate and defend an account of substratum, but to do so in terms "very much like the formula for bare particulars" (1994, 77).

Turning our attention towards an interpretive solution, I want to argue that the foregoing characterization of the apparent duplicity rests on two dubious assumptions. The characterization assumes that Locke's *eliminativist* voice and his *retentionist* voice are both directed at one and the same view of substratum. The characterization further assumes that his *sarcastic* voice and his *eliminativist* voice are always the *same* voice. I begin with the first of these assumptions.

On my interpretation, Locke's eliminativist and retentionist voices are directed at different philosophical positions on substratum. Careful attention to the relevant texts reveals that Locke systematically qualifies his eliminativist remarks as referring to an alleged *clear, distinct* idea, and that he systematically qualifies his retentionist remarks as referring to an *obscure, confused* idea. Consider a sample of both kinds of texts re-catalogued in accord with this observation:¹²

Eliminativist:

And thus here, as in all other cases, where we *use Words without having clear and distinct Ideas*, we talk like Children ... (II.xxiii.2)

... the thing they *pretend to know, and talk of*, is what they have *no distinct Idea of at all*, and so are perfectly ignorant of it, and in the dark. (II.xxiii.2)

... which Support we denote by the name Substance, though it be certain, *we have no clear, or distinct Idea* of that thing we suppose a Support. (II.xxiii.4)

... though of this supposed something, we have *no clear distinct Idea at all*. (II.xxiii.37)

Retentionist:

¹¹ According to some commentators, Locke's treatment (in the *Essay*) is uniformly hostile to the theory of substratum. Citing virtually every important passage in the *Essay* (viz., I.iv.18, II.xii.6, xiii.17-20, and xxiii.1-2), Loeb writes that "Locke persistently deprecates such a doctrine" (1981, 80). In contrast, others read Locke as emphasizing substratum. As Bolton reads him, "Locke took the inclusion of the idea of substratum to embody the most outstanding characteristic of ideas of substances" (1976, 488). Yet others have vacillated on how best to understand the relevant texts. As Bennett writes, "I once suggested that Locke believed the hostile side of the theory and intended the favorable side sarcastically, but now I can do better" (1987, 197).

¹² All emphasis is mine: I have italicized remarks that help convey whether Locke's remarks are eliminativist or retentionist; I have underscored remarks that help establish whether he is referring to an alleged clear and distinct idea, or to a confused and obscure one.

... the supposed, or confused Idea of Substance, such as it is, *is always the first and chief*. (II.xii.6)

So that of Substance, we have no Idea of what it is, *but only a confused obscure one* of what it does. (II.xiii.19)

... our complex Ideas of Substances ... *have always the confused Idea of something to which they belong...* (II.xxiii.3)

... the confused one of Substance, or of an unknown Support and Cause of their Union, *is always a part ...* (III.vi.21)

That we have "no clear distinct idea at all" does not entail that we lack even a confused, obscure one; nor does the claim that we have "only a confused obscure one" entail that we have no idea at all. The fact that Locke sometimes writes in an eliminativist voice, and other times in a retentionist voice, is not *in itself* problematic.

In the eliminativist texts, the express qualifications (concerning clarity and distinctness) are easily explained. There are multiple views on substance-in-general, in the late 17th century. Among these is the Cartesian view according to which the idea of pure substance-in-general is clearly and distinctly perceivable. In his famous wax passage of the Second Meditation, Descartes argues that upon stripping away all sensory features we arrive at a "purely mental scrutiny" of the nature of the wax -- the pure substance-in-general. On this account, the sensory ideas of the wax are "confused"; the non-sensory idea of the pure substance is "clear and distinct". (CSM 2:20-21, AT 7:29-31) From Locke's vantage point, Descartes gets things the wrong way around: properly, the simple sensory ideas of the wax are our *most* clear and distinct; the idea of a supposed substratum is obscure and confused. It is characteristic of the *Essay* that Locke takes aim at Cartesian doctrines, and the texts on the idea of substratum are interlaced with allusions to the Cartesian position.

In the retentionist texts, the express qualifications (concerning obscurity and confusion) are more problematic to explain. One worries that a consistent Lockean empiricist is not entitled to even an obscure idea of substratum.¹³ I'll confront such worries in Section 2.

Returning to what I claimed are two dubious assumptions, consider the second of these -- the assumption that Locke's sarcastic voice and his eliminativist voice are always the same voice. The most sarcastic passages are perhaps the two treatments of the Indian philosopher who supposes

¹³ In that Locke characterizes the obscure idea as *relative*, the eliminativist interpreter might be tempted to construe Locke's claims such that *that* to which the idea is relative includes the *jargon* of substratum, the *contexts* in which such jargon is used, and the like (cf. note 10 above). As will emerge, however, Locke systematically indicates that *that* to which the obscure idea is relative is not philosophical conversation, but instead the co-existing simple ideas that in part constitute our complex ideas of substances.

that the earth rests on a great elephant (itself supported by a tortoise). The first treatment occurs in II.xiii.19:

Had the poor *Indian* Philosopher (who imagined that the Earth also wanted something to bear it up) but thought of this word *Substance*, he needed not to have been at the trouble to find an Elephant to support it, and a Tortoise to support his Elephant: The word *Substance* would have done it effectually. And he that enquired, might have taken it for as good an Answer from an *Indian* Philosopher, That *Substance*, without knowing what it is, is that which supports the Earth, as we take it for a sufficient Answer, and good Doctrine, from our *European* Philosophers, That *Substance* without knowing what it is, is that which supports *Accidents*. So that of *Substance*, we have no *Idea* of what it is, but only a confused obscure one of what it does. (II.xiii.19)

The sequel occurs in II.xxiii.2 and adds to the sarcasm by extending the analogy to child babble:

... the *Indian* before mentioned; who ... being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-back'd Tortoise, replied, something, he knew not what. And thus here, as in all other cases, where we use Words without having clear and distinct *Ideas*, we talk like Children ... (II.xxiii.2)

What I claim is dubious is the assumption that in passages such as these (which are heavy on the sarcasm) that Locke intends to convey an *unmitigated* eliminativism -- rejecting even an obscure idea of substratum. On the kind of reading I oppose, Locke intends that the predicament of the Indian is analogous to that of the schoolmen who, like schoolyard children, but *unlike Locke*, utter so much nonsense without corresponding ideas -- learned dupes who chatter about a supposed supporting something.¹⁴

I think there's a better reading. On my reading, the intended analogy is between the predicament of the Indian philosopher and the one *we're all in* -- a predicament revealed by honest and sober reflection. Rather than leaving us with *no* conception of substratum, Locke thinks our experiential cognitive faculties leave us with an *impoverished* conception.¹⁵ Like the poor Indian, we have none other than a *relative* notion of that of which we speak. For both the Indian and the sober ontologist, experience furnishes an explanandum in the form of aggregated sensory ideas -- simple ideas that "go constantly together" (II.xxiii.1) -- while affording no positive idea of an explanans: "we have no *Idea* of what it is, but only a confused obscure one of what it does" (II.xiii.19). This reading is confirmed in the Stillingfleet correspondence. Locke affirms that the "Indian philosopher's he-knew-not what" is meant to parallel "*our* idea of substance" (my italics; W 4:9, cf. 4:448). And he affirms that the further analogy to children is to be understood in the same vein -- the child-talk is intended to represent that of sober ontologists:

But those whose idea of substance, whether a rational or not rational idea, is like mine, something he knows not what, must in that, with me, talk like children, when they speak of something they know not what. ... as long as we think like children, in cases where our ideas are no clearer nor distincter

¹⁴ Leibniz reads the passage in this way (*New Essays*, II.xxiii.2).

¹⁵ Note that in being in the same predicament as children who "use Words without having clear and distinct *Ideas*," we're more enlightened than those children who use words with *no* correlating ideas.

than theirs, I agree with your lordship, that I know not how it can be remedied, but that we must talk like them. (W 4:10-11)

Locke's sarcasm in the two Indian philosopher passages is largely *self*-directed. He's noting the irony in our being in the same boat as the Indian whom we're apt to suppose is worse off.

Having corrected the two dubious assumptions, Locke's eliminativist voice and his retentionist voices speak of different views on substratum, and his sarcastic voice often coincides with his retentionist voice. Given these corrections, the doubleness of attitude -- at this level -- is *only* apparent.

Significant problems remain. What should we make of the *obscurantist* and *relational* elements of Locke's retentionist remarks? One way to account for these elements is to attribute to him a *bare particulars* understanding of substratum. More than a few philosophers have affirmed the thesis that a logical requirement of the being of properties is a more fundamental being of a *bearer* of such properties. Berkeley characterizes this supposed bearer as "that antiquated and so much ridiculed notion of *materia prima*, to be met with in Aristotle and his followers" (*Principles* 11). In its most derided form, the thesis has it that such bearers are themselves *bare*: they support properties, while being themselves bare of properties -- as if the property of lending support were not itself a property.¹⁶ Even the defenders of such an interpretation are apt to disparage Locke for holding the view.¹⁷ Three kinds of textual cues might tempt one to read Locke in this way. First, he regularly employs the jargon of "support" (i.e. bearing) in connection with substratum. Second, he characterizes the idea of substratum as "obscure and relative" (cf. II.xxiii.3): What could be more *obscure* than the idea of a bare particular? And what could be a more exemplary *relative* idea than the idea of *that which provides support*? Third, Locke's apparent commitment to the inconceivability of substratumless properties aligns him with defenders of a bare particulars doctrine. As I want now to argue, these kinds of texts are better understood as symptomatic not of a bare particulars account, but of a somewhat sceptical, custom-grounded account.

¹⁶ Leibniz appears to interpret Locke as holding a version of this thesis: "If you distinguish two things in a substance -- the attributes or predicates, and their common subject -- it is no wonder that you cannot conceive anything special in this subject. That is inevitable, because you have already set aside all the attributes through which details could be conceived." (*New Essays*, II.xxiii.2)

¹⁷ Bennett defends such an interpretation, while claiming that the theory is "impossible or intolerable" (1987, 198); he adds that even Locke finds it "*embarrassing*, but he grapples with it" (1987, 201). Ayers calls the interpretation "perverse" (1998, 35); adding that "for Locke, as for his predecessors and contemporaries, substance was opposed, not to all attributes, but to 'accidents' in a technical sense, and above all to observable accidents, i.e., in the case of matter, to sensible qualities and to the powers to cause or undergo sensible change." (1991, 15)

2. The second aspect of apparent duplicity: grounding the idea in experience

In the present Section, I address doctrinal issues related to substratum. Numerous commentators have concluded that Locke's empiricist doctrines cannot accommodate an idea of a hidden substratum: since all ideas trace to two ultimate sources -- sensation and reflection -- there would seem to be no room for any such idea.¹⁸ As Stillingfleet states it:¹⁹

Now this is the case of substance; it is not intromitted by the senses, nor depends upon the operation of the mind; and so it cannot be within the compass of our reason. And therefore I do not wonder, that the gentlemen of this new way of reasoning have almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world. (W 4:5)

Doctrinal considerations notwithstanding, it is widely held that Locke acknowledges an idea of substratum.²⁰ The appearance of doctrinal duplicity comes to the fore notably in connection with a passage in which Locke looks to concede that he is not entitled to an idea of substratum. In Section 2.1, I argue that Locke does not concede, nor does he hold, that his empiricist resources are incapable of grounding an idea of substratum. In Section 2.2, I detail my own interpretation whereby Locke means to ground the idea of substratum in customary experiences of co-existing simple ideas.

2.1 Does Locke concede his empirical resources cannot ground an idea of substratum?

As various commentators have noted, in I.iv.18 Locke looks explicitly to concede that his own experiential resources do not provide for the idea of substratum. As Martha Bolton writes, in this passage Locke "himself acknowledges that his doctrine of substratum conflicts with this theory of the origin of ideas" (1976, 502).²¹ I re-quote the passage for convenience:

I confess, there is another *Idea*, which would be of general use for Mankind to have, as it is of general talk as if they had it; and that is the *Idea of substance*, which we neither have, nor can have, by *Sensation* or *Reflection*. If Nature took care to provide us any *Ideas*, we might well expect it should be such, as by our own Faculties we cannot procure to our selves ... (I.iv.18)

Though Locke might seem, here, to acknowledge what Bolton alleges, I dispute this. In context, this passage turns out continuous with his other eliminativist remarks: Locke is targeting

¹⁸ Cf. Loeb (1981, 81), Bolton (1976, 502), Mabbot (1973, 31), Yolton (1956, 136), and O'Connor (1952, 83). Loeb adds that since, for Locke, a "word or phrase (barring particles) is meaningful only if it signifies an idea (*Essay* III.ii, iv.6), his official position is that the word 'substance' [qua substratum]... is meaningless". (1981, 81)

¹⁹ Hume arrives at a similar conclusion, unequivocally affirming a thorough-going eliminativist position: "We have, therefore, no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it" (*Treatise*, I.i.6).

²⁰ Bennett remarks: "Locke behaves like someone in a jam. Failing to find any account of how there could be a Lockean idea of substances in general, he had to conclude that we really have no idea corresponding to this way of talking; but then he backed off from that, seeing what an important way of talking it is." (1987, 200)

²¹ Cf. Mabbott (1973, 31).

specifically those accounts which, like the Cartesian account, allege a clear and distinct idea of substratum.²² This is revealed in the continuation of the above quotation:

But we see on the contrary, that since by those ways, whereby other Ideas are brought into our Minds, this is not, We have *no such clear Idea at all*, and therefore signify nothing by the word Substance, *but only an uncertain supposition* of we know not what; (i.e. of something whereof we have *no particular distinct positive*) Idea,²³ which we take to be the substratum, or support, of those Ideas we do know. (I.iv.18; my emphasis)

As already noted, that I have no "distinct" idea of *X* does not entail that I have *no* idea of *X*. Moreover, if I have no idea of *X* at all, then I'm in no position to assert from where the idea of *X* *cannot* be derived -- viz., from sensation or reflection. I can assert only that I don't know the meaning of the term *X*. If, on the other hand, I have at least an obscure idea of *X* (perhaps, say, an "uncertain supposition", as Locke refers to), I may be in position to assert a variety of things. That Locke's eliminativist sentiment is directed at a "positive" idea is further evidence that he intends a limited target: that I have no *positive* idea of *X* does not entail that I lack even a *relative* idea of *X*.

In context, then, Locke can be read as acknowledging nothing stronger than that, by sensation and reflection, we can receive *no clear, distinct, positive* idea of substratum; that the only concept of substratum of which our *experiential* resources avail us is (as he later argues) an obscure (i.e. non-clear), confused (i.e. non-distinct), relative (i.e. non-positive) notion of substratum -- an "uncertain supposition of we know not what".²⁴ On this reading, Bolton is wrong about what Locke "acknowledges" in this passage. Even so, commentators maintain that Locke *should* acknowledge the point. As Bolton observes:

Locke's theory is that all simple ideas are received by sensation or reflection and all complex ideas are made by combining simple ones. Accordingly, complex ideas of substances, as those of modes, *should* include nothing but simple ideas of sensible qualities. (1976, 502)

Though it is tempting to draw this doctrinal conclusion, it is mistaken. If Bolton were correct, and the only possible constituents of complex ideas were simple ideas, then Locke's theory could not

²² In the larger context of I.iv, Locke is considering various concepts that would need to be innate in order to provide for the innateness of various alleged-as-innate principles. Throughout his discussions of innateness Locke looks to assume that an idea is innate only if it is clear and distinct (cf. I.iii.12, I.iv.4, 7).

²³ The express qualification -- that we have no "particular distinct positive" idea -- is significant in that it is not added until the fourth edition of the *Essay*. Arguably, the addition is responsive to Stillingfleet's complaints that Locke's writings leave no room for an idea of substratum.

²⁴ And note that there were other empiricist accounts of substratum, *as* an obscure supposition, with which Locke's readers would have been familiar. For instance, in his acclaimed objections to the *Meditations*, Gassendi forcefully argues that we have none but an indistinct, uncertain supposition of the substance-in-general of which Descartes alleges a clear and distinct idea. Gassendi insists that the "I" of the *cogito* is "puzzling" (AT 7:267). He characterizes substance-in-general as an "underlying 'something'" (AT 7:273, CSM 2:190), a "something that we can neither ourselves conceive nor explain to others" (AT 7:273, CSM 2:191); a something that "always eludes us" and "is only a kind of conjecture that leads us to think that there must be something underneath the accidents" (AT 7:271, CSM 2:189).

countenance ideas of *relations* between ideas.²⁵ But this is plainly at odds with Locke's own understanding of his account. Locke says that simple ideas of sensation and reflection provide the "ultimate Materials of all [the mind's] Compositions" (II.xii.2); he does not, however, say that they provide the *only* constituents. Strictly, what sensation and reflection provide are simple, positive ideas only. It is one thing to perceive two such ideas; it is quite another to perceive *their relation*. Ideas of relations (whether presumed or perceived) are complex ideas that result from the mind acting on the ideas presented in sensation and reflection (II.xii.1). Though Locke intends that ideas of relations "*all terminate in, and are concerned about those simple Ideas, either of Sensation or Reflection*" (II.xxv.9), he denies that they are *fully* reducible to them. He says that in forming ideas of relations, the mind "can carry any *Idea*, as it were, beyond it self, or, at least, look beyond it, to see how it stands in conformity to any other":²⁶

Besides the *Ideas*, whether simple or complex, that the Mind has of Things, as they are in themselves, there are others it gets from their comparison one with another. The Understanding, in the consideration of any thing, is not confined to that precise Object: It can carry any *Idea*, as it were, beyond it self, or, at least, look beyond it, to see how it stands in conformity to any other. When the Mind so considers one thing, that it does, as it were, bring it to, and set it by another, and carry its view from one to t'other: This is, as the Words import, *Relation* and *Respect*; and the Denominations given to positive Things, intimating that Respect, and serving as Marks to lead the Thoughts beyond the Subject it self denominated, to something distinct from it, are what we call *Relatives*; and the Things so brought together, *Related*. (II.xxv.1)

It is this ability that enables the mind to regard aggregated items as standing in relations with one another, and with a supposed substratum. As I want now to argue, Locke holds that customary experiences of simple ideas that "go constantly together" help induce the mind to carry these aggregated items beyond themselves so as to presume them somehow united, by something or other. On the account that emerges, the content of the sober, philosophical idea of substratum is exhausted by the obscure, relative notion of a *something* that *somehow* causes their unity.

2.2 Locke on the experiential ground of substratum

The central passages in which Locke treats the idea of substratum are II.xiii.19-20 (his initial treatment of the Indian philosopher) and the opening Sections of II.xxiii (the chapter on our complex ideas of substance).²⁷ I take §1 (of II.xxiii) to be concerned largely with the genesis of our

²⁵ Indeed, all *knowledge* would be impossible, since, according to Locke, knowledge involves perception of such relations (cf. IV.i.2).

²⁶ Some commentators have argued that Locke revises his theory of compositionism in the fourth edition of the *Essay*; cf. Jolley (1999, 45) and Aaron (1937, 113). Whether or not the larger theory is revised, the specific doctrine of II.xxv.1 (whereby the mind looks beyond given ideas, to their relations) is not new with the fourth edition.

²⁷ The Section titles are useful. II.xiii.19-20: "*Substance and Accidents of little use in Philosophy*". II.xxiii: §1, "*Ideas of Substances how made*"; §2, "*Our Idea of Substance in general*"; §3, "*Of the sorts of Substances*"; §4, "*No clear Idea of Substance in general*".

various ideas of substances -- including our ideas of particular substances, of sorts, and of substratum.²⁸ In §§2-3, Locke then elaborates on the two kinds of abstract ideas of substance: in §2, he discusses the abstract idea of substratum, substance-in-general; in §3, the abstract ideas of particular sorts of substances. In §4, he offers remarks continuous with those at the end of §1.

My emphasis will be on §1. Among Stillingfleet's complaints is that Locke puts too much emphasis on the etymology of the word 'substance'. In reply, Locke writes that "if we knew the original of all the words we meet with, we should thereby be very much helped to know the ideas they were first applied to and made to stand for" (W 4:23; cf. III.xi.24). What then does Locke take to be the etymology of 'substratum'? What is the empirical, genetic ground of the general idea which it signifies? Insofar as it is a *general* term, its genetic ground includes the particular ideas (and their genesis) from which the general idea of substratum is abstracted. I claim Locke's most detailed accounting of the genesis of ideas of particular substances comes in §1.²⁹ Insofar the idea of substratum is a *relative* idea (II.xxiii.3, I.iv.18, II.xiii.19), its grounding story includes a phenomenology of those collections of co-existing ideas because of which we suppose a substratum -- viz., those positive ideas to which Locke regards it as relative.³⁰ Again, I claim that §1 provides the most detailed account.

Here is the full text of §1:

[(a)] The Mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple *Ideas*, conveyed in by the *Senses*, as they are found in exterior things, or by *Reflection* on its own Operations, [(b)] takes notice also, that a certain number of these simple *Ideas* go constantly together; [(c)] which being presumed to belong to one thing, and [(d)] Words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called so united in one subject, by one name; [(e)] which, by inadvertency, we are apt afterward to talk of, and consider as one simple *Idea*, which indeed is a complication of many *Ideas* together; [(f)] Because, as I have said, [(g)] 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*.

²⁸ Given my reading, a footnote added in the fifth edition of the *Essay* (the fourth edition is the last edition published by Locke) is correct to note that §1 does not address directly the abstracted idea of substratum (i.e. substance-in-general). But the note is misleading insofar as it conveys that §1 is irrelevant to the acquisition of the idea of substance-in-general -- as if the particular ideas from it is abstracted have no bearing on its genesis. I should add that the authority of the whole set of Stillingfleet footnotes (added to the fifth edition) is in doubt. According to Nidditch, "it is uncertain whether Locke himself authorized the incorporation of these extracts into the *Essay*" (1975, xxxii).

²⁹ In contrast with my reading, Ayers takes §1 to be about the genesis of our ideas of particular *sorts* only (cf. 1998, 36). Bennett takes §§1-4 to be advancing a theory of property instantiation (cf. 1968, 87-88). Mackie writes, of §1: "It is plain" that "Locke is primarily describing what he takes to be our ordinary way of thinking, and is not necessarily endorsing it himself. He is certainly not constructing here anything that we could call his own theory of substance ..." (1976, 74-75)

³⁰ By analogy, we should expect a characterization of the genesis of the idea of gravity to refer largely to those items to which it is relative -- e.g., the behavior of planets, tides, the sun, falling rocks, and so on. To Stillingfleet, Locke remarks that, "from the positive, simple ideas got by sensation or reflection, [the mind] comes to the general relative idea of substance; which, without the positive simple ideas, it would never have" (W 4:21-22).

I have added text markers to facilitate my commentary. (In the re-quoted segments, below, all italics are mine.) It is not my aim to argue that Locke grounds the general idea of substratum *wholly* in experience -- without any appeal to native conceptual structure, or any operation of reason. I shall, however, argue that custom/habit does play the prominent grounding role that his §1 remarks suggest.

As will emerge, the eventual idea of substratum involves the idea of something that somehow unifies an aggregate. A strong element of unity is indeed an outstanding feature in the history of the idea of substratum. Among the problems for an empiricist account of substratum is to explain how, from experience, we come to the idea of an aggregate *as* unified, rather than *as* a mere, co-existing collection of un-unified elements. Presumably, experiential appeals cannot establish that the aggregated items *are* of the one kind rather than the other. But such appeals might explain why the aggregated items would come to be *regarded as* unified (or presumed/supposed/judged so),³¹ rather than regarded as a mere, co-existing collection. On my interpretation, Locke's account involves an explanatory project of this latter sort. In making the case that the experience of customary/habitual associations of ideas helps explain the genesis of the idea of substratum, Locke does not need to produce details of *how* these habitual experiences lead to the result that the mind regards some aggregates as unified; he needs only that there is sufficient evidence that this result *somehow* occurs. Likewise, the success of the custom interpretation I'm proposing does not depend on producing such details on Locke's behalf.

Consider the opening remarks of §1:

- (a) The Mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple Ideas, conveyed in by the Senses, as they are found in exterior things, or by Reflection on its own Operations ...

As a first step in acquiring an idea of substratum, it is significant that the mind have had enough experiences to be *already* "furnished with a great number of the simple Ideas" -- including simple ideas involving reflection. Though Locke provides no inventory of the simple ideas he thinks important, interesting questions arise concerning which kinds of simple ideas might be prerequisites to the eventual acquisition of the idea of substratum. Arguably, a requirement of coming to regard an aggregate as somehow unified is that the mind already has a concept of unity.³² Though Locke

³¹ On Locke's account of judgment, we *judge* that *x* and *y* are related (in such and such manner) only if we do not *perceive* their relation: in judgment, we presume/suppose what our ideas do not allow us to perceive. Cf. IV.xiv.3-4, and IV.i-ii (on the knowledge-worthy character of perceived relations); cf. also note 65 below.

³² Locke's comments on complex ideas (cf. II.xii.1) strongly suggest that in every complex idea the mind brings something to the experience (cf. Jolley 1999, 47), though this need not entail that that which it brings is innate.

does not address such issues in II.xxiii, his remarks elsewhere suggest that a *simple* idea of unity is among the first ideas acquired in experience:

Amongst all the Ideas we have, as there is *none suggested to the Mind by more ways*, so there is none more simple, than that of *Unity*, or One: it has no shadow of Variety or Composition in it: every Object our Senses are employed about; every Idea in our Understandings; every Thought of our Minds brings this Idea along with it. (my italics; II.xvi.1; cf. II.vii.7)

In being "furnished with a great number of the simple Ideas", the mind would thus have this simple idea of unity.³³ To avoid circularity, this prior idea could not *be* an idea of substance, though it would anticipate it. This simple idea of unity does involve a notion of *thinghood* -- or *entity-hood*, at any rate -- but this is not yet the notion of thinghood involved in the idea of substance. This prior idea is *utterly simple* -- having "no shadow of Variety or Composition in it"; the idea of substance involves the idea of a *unified aggregate*. Moreover, the simple ideas which give rise to the simple idea of unity are not regarded as *subsisting* (independently existing) entities;³⁴ supposed substances are. At best, then, this simple idea of unity prefigures the eventual idea of substance.

As §1 continues, Locke draws out some effects of custom:

- (b) [the mind] takes notice also, that a certain number of these simple Ideas *go constantly together*;
- (c) which being presumed to belong to one thing,³⁵ and
- (d) Words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called so united in one subject, by one name ...

Though Locke does not expressly say so, I take him to hold that the noted presumption, in (c), *results from* the experienced, customary co-existences, in (b). How are we to understand this, *qua result*? It is implausible that Locke intends the noted presumption to result from deliberation and will, since the mind is in its infancy, and since the acquisition of concepts of causality are also in process.³⁶ It seems more likely that Locke is appealing to a psychological principle of association. As he explains in a number of places, custom or habit can serve as an inadvertent and powerful

³³ Interesting philosophical questions arise in connection with the alleged *experiential acquisition* of the simple idea of unity. It is unclear that the experience of these units (individual ideas) *as* units is possible without already having an idea of unity. Space does not permit us to pursue such questions, in the present paper.

³⁴ They are instead experienced as *components* of larger aggregates which come to be regarded as substances.

³⁵ In keeping with his interpretation of II.xxiii.1 as an account of *sorts* (cf. note 29), Ayers glosses Locke's remark, in (c), as follows: "i.e. one and the same kind of thing" (1998, 36). On my reading, (b) and (c) refer at least to particular substances, and very likely to sorts as well. Arguably, it is not so easy to distinguish the respective geneses of our ideas of particular substances and our ideas of various sorts of substances. Each of the co-existing ideas is (qua occurrence of the mind) ontologically independent of similar such ideas (i.e. similar in terms of content) occurring in other instances of the experienced union. Consequently, what we really notice -- when noticing that the simple ideas in our complex ideas of a particular substance *go constantly* together -- is that the same *sorts* of ideas regularly co-exist.

³⁶ Were the result deliberative, it would presuppose some version of the principle of sufficient reason. Yet, as Locke characterizes causal concepts, their genesis depends on a prior (or perhaps contemporaneous) acquisition of the concept of substance (cf. II.xxvi.1).

inducement to judgment (i.e. presumption): "*Habits*, especially such as are begun very early, come, at last, to *produce actions in us, which often escape our observation*" (II.ix.10; cf. II.xxi.69).

This in many cases, by a settled habit, in things whereof we have frequent experience, is performed so constantly, and so quick, that we take that for the Perception of our Sensation, which is an *Idea* formed by our Judgment ... (II.ix.9)

Given the power of custom,³⁷ ideas that are customarily experienced together might come to be inseparable in our thought -- even where they lack any relationship as could be connected by reason.³⁸ Even so, it's unclear why the inseparable items would come to be regarded as unified. Other of Locke's remarks suggest that he holds that habitually associated ideas may come to be treated by the mind as if they were united as "but one *Idea*" (II.xxxiii.7). So, the presumed unity is not the conclusion of a demonstration -- much less is it intuited. Nor does it result from a voluntary joining of ideas. Rather, upon taking notice "that a certain number of these simple Ideas go constantly together," the mind inadvertently presumes them "to belong to one thing". Unfortunately, Locke is not forthcoming with the details of how and why habitual experiences help induce the mind to form such judgments. He seems less concerned to provide a detailed mechanics of the process than to convey the fact that the requisite customary experiences somehow contribute to the said result.

In (d), linguistic factors are introduced that, as Locke explains elsewhere, can strengthen the presumption of unity. While discussing ideas of mixed modes which, unlike ideas of substances, are "made by a voluntary Collection of *Ideas* put together in the Mind, independent from any original Patterns in Nature" (III.v.5), Locke adds that "though therefore it be the Mind that makes the Collection, 'tis the Name which is, as it were the Knot, that ties them fast together" (III.v.10).³⁹

The continuation of §1 implies something further. The co-existing items come to be regarded not merely as united, but as "one simple *Idea*".⁴⁰

³⁷ Locke calls it "a greater power than Nature" (I.iii.25).

³⁸ In the chapter on the association of ideas, Locke writes: "[T]here is another Connexion of *Ideas* wholly owing to Chance or Custom; *Ideas* that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds, that 'tis very hard to separate them, they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it" (II.xxxiii.5).

³⁹ Though in the ideas of substances (in contrast with mixed modes) the union of co-existing ideas is not wholly voluntary, the collections united in the mind may nonetheless vary across perceivers -- "*the number* it combines, *depends upon the various Care, Industry, or Fancy of him that makes it*" (III.vi.29). This occurs, as Locke notes, in that "men, in making their general *Ideas* [of substances], seeking more the convenience of Language and quick dispatch [cf. (d)], by short and comprehensive signs, than the true and precise Nature of Things, as they exist, have, in the framing their abstract *Ideas*, chiefly pursued that end, which was, to be furnished with store of general, and variously comprehensive Names" (III.vi.32).

⁴⁰ Arguably, in saying that we consider the aggregate "as one simple *Idea*" Locke does not mean to say that we so regard it *qua idea*. It is implausible that he means to attribute to the young mind a recognition of its ideas *as ideas*. I take him instead to mean that this complex entity (which, according to Locke's theory is a complex *idea*) comes to be

- (e) which, by inadvertency, we are apt afterward to talk of, and *consider as one simple Idea*, which indeed is a complication of many Ideas together; ...

As such, (e) is neither a reiteration of (c) nor of (d). Unfortunately, Locke does not elaborate this interesting claim.⁴¹

§1 continues:

- (f) Because, as I have said,
(g) 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.

Before turning to philosophical issues raised in (g), consider the textual issue raised in (f). I am aware of no plausible candidates, in any published edition of the *Essay*, for an antecedent text -- something *already* "said" -- to which Locke is here referring. I believe this remark is an accidental hangover from Draft B. The proto-text of II.xxiii.1 occurs in §60 of Draft B:

The minde being as I have declared furnishd with a great number of these simple Ideas, conveyd in by the senses as they are found in exterior things or by reflection on its owne operations takes notice also that a certain number of hese simple Ideas goe constantly togeather, which being presumed to belong to one thing, & words being suited to vulgar apprehension & made use of for quick dispatch are called soe united in one subject by one name. Which by inadvertency we are apt afterwards to talke of & consider as one simple Idea which is indeed a complication of many simple Ideas togeather. *Because as I have said above §19* not imagining how these simple Ideas can subsist of them selves we inure our selves to suppose some substratum ... [sic] (Nidditch and Rogers, 1990; my italics)

In this proto-version, the antecedent is clear: an earlier §19. The undoubted referent is the following remark from §19 of Draft B:

Hence it comes to passe that we have noe Ideas nor notion of the essence of matter, but it lies wholly in the darke. Because when we talke of or thinke on those things which we call material substances as man horse stone the Idea we have of either of them is but the complication or collection of those particular simple Ideas of sensible qualitys which we use to finde united in the thing cald horse or stone (as I shall hereafter shew more at large) & which are the immediate objects of our sense which because we cannot apprehend how they should subsist alone or one in an other we suppose they subsist & are united in some fit & common subject, which being as we suppose the support of those sensible qualitys we call substance ... [sic] (ibid.)

This Draft B text (§19) is itself the proto-text of what appears as II.xxiii.4 in the published versions of the *Essay*:

treated by the mind in the same way that simple such entities (that, according to Locke's theory are simple *ideas*) are usually treated.

⁴¹ His remarks on the Molyneux problem are suggestive (cf. II.ix.8-10). In those remarks he observes that when, "by an habitual custom", one kind of idea is linked to another, the mind inadvertently "alters the Appearances" of the one kind into the other, by an act of judgment (II.ix.8). In the case at hand, Locke might well hold that collections of co-existing simple ideas are, by habitual custom, linked with the simple idea of unity. If so, he may mean to convey that given this habitual custom of bringing the collection under that concept of unity (itself a simple idea in its original), the mind inadvertently regards the complex idea *as* simple.

Hence when we talk or think of any particular sort of corporeal Substances, as *Horse, Stone*, etc. though the *Idea*, we have of either of them, be but the Complication, or Collection of those several simple *Ideas* of sensible Qualities, which we use to find united in the thing called *Horse* or *Stone*, yet because we cannot conceive, how they should subsist alone, nor one in another, we suppose them existing in, and supported by some common subject; *which Support we denote by the name Substance*, though it be certain, we have no clear, or distinct *Idea* of that *thing* we suppose a Support.⁴² (II.xxiii.4)

This is useful in that it establishes that Locke intends that (g) is continuous with II.xxiii.4, notwithstanding their subtle differences.⁴³

Turning attention to the philosophical content of (g), I want to call attention to three interrelated items. First, we have the initial appearance of the term 'substance'. What justifies its appearance? It is clear from a number of texts that Locke thinks the term 'substance' means none other than "support". Locke says, for example, that "we call that Support *Substantia*; which, according to the true import of the Word, is in plain *English, standing under, or upholding*" (II.xxiii.2). But what does he mean by 'support'? As Berkeley observes, "it is evident *support* cannot here be taken in its usual or literal sense, as when we say that pillars support a building: in what sense therefore must it be taken?" (*Principles* 16) Bear in mind that Locke's criticisms of the philosophical usage of the jargon of substratum arise, in part, because such usage does not adequately reflect the ideas of which such terms are the purported signs.⁴⁴ We should expect, then, that Locke's own appeals to *support*-talk are intended to be understood in terms of ideas that we actually have. Which ideas? Given our genetic account thus far, the plausible candidate ideas are the co-existing simple ideas, and our further ideas of them *as* united. I suggest that Locke's references to *support* are best understood *wholly* in terms of this *experienced union* of simple ideas. In supposing the simple ideas to be united (to "belong to one thing"), we regard them as one term in a supposed relation, a relation in which the other term is a supposed *unifier*.⁴⁵ Locke's use of 'support' (in connection with substratum) thus has a two-fold sense. It can refer to the supposed

⁴² Bear in mind the title of §4: "*No clear Idea of Substance in general*".

⁴³ Among the differences is the reference to conceivability, in §4, where §1 refers to imaginability. If, however, Locke is an imagist, for whom conceptions are analyzable into sensory images, the difference here need be no more than verbal.

⁴⁴ Stillingfleet charges that Locke has "almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world". Among his responses, Locke writes: "He that would show me a more clear and distinct idea of substance, would do me a kindness I should thank him for. But this is the best I can hitherto find, either in my own thoughts, or in the books of logicians: for their account or idea of it is, that it is 'Ens', or 'res per se subsistens et substans accidentibus'; which in effect is no more, but that substance is a being or thing; or, in short, something they know not what, or of which they have no clearer idea, than that it is something which supports accidents, or other simple ideas or modes, and is not supported itself as a mode or an accident." (W 4:7-8)

⁴⁵ To Stillingfleet, Locke writes: "But because a relation cannot be founded in nothing, or be the relation of nothing, and the thing here related as a supporter or support is not represented to the mind by any clear and distinct idea; therefore 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 ..." (W 4:21-22)

thing providing support -- namely, *that which unites* the co-existing ideas, the "unknown, Cause of their Union" (II.xxiii.6).⁴⁶ It can refer also to the supposed *relation* of support -- the supposed unification. As Locke says, the general idea of substratum "is a complex idea, made up of the general idea of something, or being, with the relation of a support to accidents" (W 4:19). Our account grounds the notion of substratum-qua-support in the customary experience of simple ideas that go constantly together, and the presumption of a *something* that *somehow* causes their unity. Given this account, Locke has an apt answer to Bennett's line of questioning:

We can only smile at the idea that unless something lies under the qualities and props them up they will ... what? Fall flat? Scatter? Disintegrate? (1987, 198)

The proper reply lies in Bennett's second option: unless something supports the co-existing items they will ... *scatter, or disperse*.⁴⁷

Second, in (g) there is an appeal to reason as opposed to mere custom: reasoned inquiry occurs in an effort to explain *how* the simple ideas might "subsist by themselves".⁴⁸ This appeal is not intended to *induce* a presumption of unity, as custom has already done so in connection with (b) and (c);⁴⁹ rather, the reasoned inquiry occurs in an effort to *explain* the presumed unity. As (g) conveys (along with the parallel II.xxiii.4), the inquiry reveals no conceivable explanation as to how the co-existing items might support themselves -- "we cannot conceive how they should subsist alone, nor one in another".⁵⁰ Unable to conceive how they could subsist of themselves, we

⁴⁶ The Draft C proto-version of II.xxiii.6 is suggestive: "And this in short is the idea we have of particular substances, viz., a collection of several simple ideas which are united together in a supposed but unknown cause of their subsistence and union so that by substance and the subject wherein we think they inhere *we mean nothing else but the unknown cause of their union and coexistence*" (my italics; cited in Aaron 1937, Part One, in which Aaron has helpfully included large segments of Draft C).

⁴⁷ Insofar as Bennett's point is that the observed co-existences imply no *logical* need for support, he is surely right. There is, however, a long history, in metaphysics and in natural philosophy, of hypothesis and conjecture intended to explain experienced co-existences. I take Locke to hold that the supposition of a substratum belongs in that tradition, a view that would not have been foreign to his readers (cf. Gassendi's account of substratum, in note 24 above).

⁴⁸ Bolton writes: "The argument explicit in this account is far from convincing -- why can't qualities subsist by themselves? How does substratum solve the problem?" (1976, 491) My own reading draws heavily on the fact that Locke's claim is not that it is unimaginable (or "inconceivable", as in §4) *that* the co-existing items should subsist by themselves; his claim is that it is unimaginable *how* they should so subsist. This distinction (between "it is inconceivable *that* p" and "it is inconceivable *how* p") will emerge as important to my treatment in Section 3 below.

⁴⁹ Custom does also play a role in (g), albeit a different role than in (b) and (c). Among other differences, in (b) and (c) the customary phenomena impose themselves on us; in (g), Locke says that we accustom "our selves" to suppose the substratum. This is consistent with there being a role for reasoned inquiry in the latter but not the former. Ayers notes that "the word 'accustom' [in (g)] seems to refer, not to the process by which we acquire and first apply the idea, but to the condition we are in once we use it habitually" (1977, 87). With regard to the *word* 'accustom', in (g), this is correct. But this observation has no impact on the *reference* to custom, in (b) -- a customary co-existence (of simple ideas) the explanation of which (on my reading) is at issue.

⁵⁰ Locke leaves unclear the details of the explanation sought. He may mean to allude to the lack of necessary connections between the co-existing ideas: "the simple *Ideas* whereof our complex *Ideas* of Substances are made up, are, for the most part such, as carry with them, in their own Nature, no visible necessary connexion, or inconsistency with any other simple *Ideas*, whose *co-existence* with them we would inform our selves about" (IV.iii.10).

"suppose some substratum" for explanatory purpose -- indeed, "we accustom our selves" to supposing it.⁵¹

Third, in (g) the supposed support is attributed to something secret/unobserved. In (c), there is no commitment to whether the supposed support of the union derives from the observed parts themselves, or something else. In (g), an express effort to explain how the explanation might lie with the observed parts fails, thus giving rise to the supposition that the explanation lies *elsewhere*. It's worth noting that these are subtly different notions of *support*, even where support is understood (as I contend) in terms of the relation of union: the notion at work in (c) entails no more than a *sustaining* of the union of co-existing items; that at work in (g) involves a sustaining of the union *from underneath* (as it were) -- an "*under-propping*" (as Locke puts it in II.xiii.20), or a "standing under or upholding" (as he puts it in II.xxiii.2). This additional element -- the *sub* in *substantia* -- is surely metaphorical:⁵² Locke does not mean that if we look underneath the observable, co-existing parts of a thing we will find the supporting *thing-itself* to which they belong. I take him to mean no more than that the supposed support is presumed to derive from something *beyond experience*: we suppose that something must support the experienced union -- that it's no coincidence that the experienced items "go constantly together"; yet none of the co-existing items, nor any aggregate of them, provides a suitable explanation.

It is noteworthy that these additional moves (present in (g), and absent in (b) and (c)) are *philosophical* moves -- moves that commoners are not apt to make. The tendency to inquire into the explanation of observed phenomena is characteristic of the philosophical mind; as is the tendency to appeal to transcendental explanations; as is the tendency to use 'substance' to refer to a supposed substratum.⁵³ Locke acknowledges that ordinary language *does* "intimate" that there's a *thing* that is non-identical with any one of its particular, observed qualities:

[A]nd therefore when we speak of any sort of Substance, we say it is a *thing* having such or such Qualities, as Body is a *thing* that is extended, figured, and capable of Motion; a Spirit a *thing* capable of thinking; and so Hardness, Friability, and Power to draw Iron, we say, are Qualities to be found in a Loadstone. These, and the like fashions of speaking intimate, that the Substance is supposed

⁵¹ Writes Leibniz: "we have no need to 'accustom' ourselves to it, or to 'suppose' it; for from the beginning we conceive several predicates in a single subject, and that is all there is to these metaphorical words 'support' and 'substratum'." (*New Essays*, II.xxiii.1) From Locke's empiricist standpoint, this gets things exactly the wrong way around. We have no conception (better: presumption) of a single subject of multiple predication prior to the customary experience of simple ideas that "go constantly together".

⁵² In §6 Locke explicitly flags it *as* metaphor, by means of "as it were" talk.

⁵³ As Locke later explains (in Book III of the *Essay*), it is one of the chief abuses of language that "Men have names in their Mouths, without any determinate *Ideas* in their Minds, whereof they are the signs" (III.x.23; cf. III.x.2ff). He thinks this abuse occurs largely (though not exclusively) in connection with the jargon of "Schoolmen and Metaphysicians" (III.x.2) and "manifestly fills their Discourse with abundance of empty unintelligible noise and jargon" (III.x.4).

always *some thing* besides the Extension, Figure, Solidity, Motion, Thinking, or other observable *Ideas*, though we know not what it is. (II.xxiii.3)

But in ordinary usage, such ways of speaking need not imply that the said thing/subject is *unobserved*, as opposed to assimilating it to the *collection* of observed, aggregated parts. As Mackie notes, it is perfectly possible to talk of qualities that are *of* a collection, rather than of a secret substratum (1976, 79).⁵⁴ Though he does not quite say so, Locke may well mean, with (g) (and his comments in parallel passages), to have moved onto the philosopher's turf, while intending to characterize a more general genesis in (a) thru (e).⁵⁵ In any case, both of these notions of support -- the commonplace, and the philosophical -- are sufficient to provide for the complex idea of a particular *thing*/substance.

Thus far, we have accounted for the genesis of complex ideas of particular substances. The complex idea of a particular substance consists in (i) a united collection of simple ideas, annexed together with (ii) the supposition of a supporting/uniting something (allowing for some difference between the philosophical and the commonsensical version of the supposition). At this juncture in the genetic order, the mind has everything needed -- in terms of ideational resources -- to generate Locke's two kinds of abstract ideas of substance: the ideas of particular sorts, and the idea of substance-in-general.⁵⁶

Of the two abstract ideas of substance, our primary concern is with the idea of substance-in-general. Elsewhere, Locke articulates how general ideas are generated from particular ideas:

Words become general, by being made the signs of general *Ideas*: and *Ideas* become general, by separating from them the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other *Ideas*, that may determine them to this or that particular Existence. By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more Individuals than one ... (III.iii.6)

⁵⁴ Prima facie, II.xxiii.3 can be read in a contrary way, such that the intimated thing is non-identical with any *collection* of particular qualities, rather than (as I read it) any *particular quality*. On closer inspection, however, this reading is implausible. The grammar of collective substances (cf. e.g. the idea of an army, as discussed in II.xxiv) is the same as that of particular substances. Yet in ordinary usage the grammar of collective substances does not imply the being of anything other than the observable particulars that form the collection. Such passages *can* be read as logico-linguistic arguments for the need for a bearer of properties. But they need not entail any more than an acknowledgement that ordinary language reflects that our ideas are of supposed unities with experienced parts.

⁵⁵ One of the virtues of distinguishing the commonsensical and the philosophical conceptions of substance stems from the role to be assigned to the principle of sufficient reason (cf. note 36). The conceptual repertoire of mature philosophers avails them of such principles, while that available in connection with (b) and (c) does not. It's no part of the present project, however, to explain the experiential genesis of the principle of sufficient reason.

⁵⁶ Insofar as one's idea is of a particular thing, *qua thing*, the two components ((i) and (ii)) are inseparable. But in considering the collection of simple ideas separated from the supposition of a supporting something, one ipso facto considers it as a *mere aggregate*, rather than as a substance. And when considering the supposed, supporting something abstracted from the collection of particular items for which it is the supposed support, one ipso facto shifts to the abstract idea of substance-in-general. This is why Locke says, of our complex ideas of particular substances, that they "have always" the confused idea of a substratum -- that it "is always a part" of our ideas of things, *as things*.

Though Locke does not reiterate this account of abstraction in II.xxiii,⁵⁷ we can apply it without difficulty. When the obscure and relative idea of a particular substratum is abstracted from the "circumstances of real Existence, as Time, Place, or any other concomitant *Ideas*" (II.xi.9), what remains is an obscure and relative idea of a supposed something that supports *such* sensible qualities. In II.xxiii.2, Locke characterizes the resulting general idea:⁵⁸

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; which Qualities are commonly called Accidents. . . . The *Idea* then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that Support *Substantia*; which, according to the true import of the Word, is in plain *English*, *standing under*, or *upholding*. (II.xxiii.2)

As earlier indicated, I take Locke's sarcasm in this passage to be partly self-directed. No idea is more ubiquitous than the general idea of substratum: our myriad ideas of things "have always the confused *Idea* of *something* to which they [the co-existing qualities] belong" (II.xxiii.3). Yet we're "in the dark" (II.xxiii.2) as to *what* the supposed substratum *is*.

Not all of Locke's sarcasm is self-directed. Part of the intended irony in the story of the Indian philosopher (particularly in the first formulation of it, in II.xiii) lies in the contrast between the Indian's explanatory efforts and those of the learned philosophers. The claim that the earth is supported by a great elephant is, of course, empirically false, but at least it is *informative*. In employing the jargon of substance and accident, the learned philosophers have failed to achieve this virtue. For Locke, the meaning of 'substratum' is exhausted by the obscure notion of a *supposed support*; in turn, the meaning of 'accident' is exhausted by the obscure notion of that which is *supposedly supported*. Locke's critique of the learned use of such terms is memorable:⁵⁹

Whatever a learned Man may do here, an intelligent *American*, who enquired into the Nature of Things, would scarce take it for a satisfactory Account, if desiring to learn our Architecture, he should be told, That a Pillar was a thing supported by a *Basis*, and a *Basis* something that supported a Pillar. Would he not think himself mocked, instead of taught, with such an account as this? . . . But were the Latin words *inherentia* and *Substantia*, put into the plain English ones that answer them, and were called *Sticking on* and *Under-propping*, they would better discover to us the very great

⁵⁷ That Locke neglects to expressly mention the role of abstraction is brought out in one of his replies to Stillingfleet. As Locke understands him, Stillingfleet mistakenly reads II.xxiii.1 as an account of substance-in-general; the mistake leads Stillingfleet to pose the misguided objection that Locke holds that "the general idea of substance [comes] to be framed in our minds" not by "abstracting and enlarging simple ideas" but "by a complication of many simple ideas together" (W 4:15). Locke's reply: "I beg leave to remind your lordship, that I say in more places than one [cf. II.xi.8f and III.iii.6f], and particularly those above quoted [cf. W 4:11f], where ex professo I treat of abstraction and general ideas, that they are all made by abstracting; and therefore could not be understood to mean, that that of substance was made any other way; however my pen might have slipped, or the negligence of expression, where I might have something else than the general idea of substance in view, make me seem to say so." (W 4:16)

⁵⁸ Much of §2 has already been quoted above and is left out here.

⁵⁹ This passage comes immediately on the heels of the first treatment of the Indian philosopher.

clearness there is in the Doctrine of *Substance and Accidents*, and shew of what use they are in deciding of Questions in Philosophy. (II.xiii.20)

Such explanations are wholly uninformative -- what Locke calls *trifling*.⁶⁰ He defines trifling propositions as those that "be certainly true" though "they add no Light to our Understandings, bring no increase to our Knowledge" (IV.viii.1); adding that they "have a certainty in them, but 'tis but a *verbal Certainty*, but not instructive" (IV.viii.8).⁶¹

Locke does not think the jargon of substance and accident/mode needs to be *wholly* uninformative. Among the virtues of the custom interpretation is that it provides a non-trifling, experiential account of such notions. We *do* have distinct, positive ideas of the phenomena the philosophers call accidents or modes, but our distinct, positive ideas do not present such phenomena *as* accidents -- i.e., as being ontologically dependent. *Pre*-custom, we perceive aggregated *items*. (I intend 'item' to be an ontologically neutral term.) Experience then accustoms us to regular, predictable bundles of co-existing such items. *Post*-custom, we *suppose* the co-existing items to be somehow unified. Unable to explain how they could subsist in themselves, the philosopher then presumes their union is somehow dependent -- "we imagine [they] cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them" (II.xxiii.2). This just *is* to regard the unified items *as* accidents/modes. And in so regarding them, we ipso facto presume a supporting something, i.e. a substance. In that our ideas represent the world via regular such bundles, we judge the world to consist of *things* that *have* the experienced qualities -- a world of substances and their properties. Properly, then, the jargon of *thinghood* signals nothing more than that we regard the experienced union of co-existing items as somehow dependent -- as more than accidental co-existences. This *is* somewhat informative, even if false. But where substance-talk is intended to signify a substratum demonstrable from accidents -- qua dependent beings -- such talk is trifling.

⁶⁰ Alexander argues that, among other things, Locke intends substratum to play an explanatory role, namely "to provide something for qualities to qualify" (1985, 204). As I read Locke, this is the kind of trifling explanation he opposes.

⁶¹ Locke adds: "Hence it comes to pass, that one may often meet with very clear and coherent Discourses, that amount yet to nothing. For 'tis plain, that Names of substantial Beings, as well as others, as far as they have relative Significations affixed to them, may, with great Truth, be joined negatively and affirmatively in Propositions, as their relative Definitions make them fit to be so joined; and Propositions consisting of such Terms, may, with the same clearness, be deduced one from another, as those that convey the most real Truths; and all this, without any knowledge of the Nature or Reality of Things existing without us. By this method, one may make Demonstrations and undoubted Propositions in Words, and yet thereby advance not one jot in the Knowledge of the Truth of Things; v.g. he that having learnt these following Words, with their ordinary mutually relative Acceptations annexed to them; v.g. *Substance ...*" (IV.viii.9)

3. The third aspect of apparent duplicity: grounding the idea in reason vs. in custom

By now, it should be clear that the *Essay* contains passages that are (to say the least) strongly suggestive of a custom account. The tendency, however, has been to interpret Locke's remarks to Stillingfleet as clarifying that he means to ground the idea of substratum in *reason* rather than custom.⁶² I want to address what I believe are the two most problematic kinds of passages for the custom interpretation. In Section 3.1, I address texts in which Locke appears explicitly to endorse Stillingfleet's "rational" account of substratum at the expense of a custom account. In 3.2, I address texts in which Locke appears to say that even our *very first* ideas "carry with them a supposition of a substratum", thus preempting the grounding role I have attributed to custom.

3.1 Does Locke embrace Stillingfleet's rational idea of substratum?

As Stillingfleet understands Locke's theory of ideas, it renders uncertain the being of substance, thus undermining the doctrine of the trinity. Given that Locke's simple ideas of sensation and reflection are the "sole matter and foundation of all our reasonings," writes Stillingfleet, substratum "cannot be within the compass of our reason" (W 4:5). Stillingfleet worries that Locke's theory leaves nothing but the fancies of men as the ground of substratum:

And is this all indeed, that is to be said for the being of substance, "that we accustom ourselves to suppose a substratum?" Is that custom grounded upon true reason, or not? If not, then accidents or modes must "subsist of themselves, and these simple ideas need no tortoise to support them: for figures and colours, &c. would do well enough of themselves, but for some fancies men have accustomed themselves to." (W 4:15-16)

A proper view, according to Stillingfleet, has it that the idea of substratum is a *rational* idea grounded in a *repugnancy to our conceptions*:

[A]nd amongst these general notions, or rational ideas, substance is one of the first; because we find, that we can have no true conceptions of any modes or accidents (no matter which) but we must conceive a substratum, or subject wherein they are. Since *it is a repugnancy to our first conceptions of things, that modes or accidents should subsist by themselves*; and therefore the rational idea of substance is one of the first and most natural ideas in our minds. (W 4:12-13; my italics)

Indeed, Stillingfleet holds that the conclusion of substratum is a "mere effect of reason" (W 4:445f), being founded in no way on custom or supposition.

In his numerous lines of response to Stillingfleet, Locke can be read as disavowing himself of a custom account, embracing instead the very same "rational" ground as Stillingfleet. Locke repeatedly professes agreement with Stillingfleet, claiming to ground the idea of substratum in "true

⁶² Cf. Ayers (1977, 87), Mackie (1976, 80), Mabbott (1973, 30ff), Gibson (1968, ch. 5), and Fraser (1959, II.xxiii.1).

reason", indeed, in the same "repugnancy to our conceptions" to which Stillingfleet appeals.

Among Locke's many such professions are these:

[M]y lord, give me leave, I beseech you, to boast to the world, that what I have said concerning our general idea of substance, and the way how we come by it, has the honour to be confirmed by your lordship's authority. (W 4:13)

So that if this be that which your lordship means by the rational idea of substance, I see nothing there is in it against what I have said ... (W 4:22)

Your lordship then, if I understand your reasoning here, concludes that there is substance, "because it is a repugnancy to our conceptions of things"... and I conclude the same thing ... And therefore it seems to me, that I have laid down the same certainty of the being of substance, that your lordship has done. (W 4:445-46)

Prima facie, these texts are bad news for a custom interpretation, as many commentators have noted. According to Fraser, Locke's remarks in II.xxiii.1 may "seem to refer our idea of substance to 'imagination' and 'custom', instead of finding it implied in the very intelligibility of experience," but in his exchange with Stillingfleet, Locke "vindicates" himself -- finally clarifying that substratum "is necessary in reason" (1959, 390-91, note 3).⁶³

As a first step in defending my custom interpretation, note that Locke continues to affirm (to Stillingfleet) the various claims of the *Essay* that Stillingfleet finds troubling. Notwithstanding his apparent professions of agreement with Stillingfleet, Locke continues to affirm that the jargon of substratum is akin to schoolyard prattle (W 4:10-11). And he continues to maintain that the idea of substratum is grounded in custom and supposition -- a source of on-going frustration for Stillingfleet (cf. W 4:18).⁶⁴ Indeed, in the final exchange between them on the subject of substratum, a persisting sticking point for Stillingfleet is Locke's insistence on a role for supposition.⁶⁵ Stillingfleet complains that Locke's account "is but supposing still", regardless that Locke asserts it as consonant with Stillingfleet's *rational* account (W 4:445).

⁶³ Mabbott concurs, noting that "Stillingfleet's criticism compels Locke to clear up the confusion in the *Essay*" (1973, 33); adding that "Locke in fact agrees with Stillingfleet that the idea of substance *is* grounded on reason, that is, on the awareness of a necessary connection and not on custom" (1973, 30). Mackie writes that, "under pressure from Stillingfleet," Locke "explicitly endorses" Stillingfleet's logico-linguistic line of argument (1976, 80).

⁶⁴ Note too that Locke appears to have made a variety of changes to the *Essay* that are responsive to objections from Stillingfleet (cf. note 23). In none of these changes, however, does he back down from the language of custom and supposition.

⁶⁵ For Locke, the emphasis on presumption and supposition signals that we lack knowledge-worthy ideas. He thinks the paradigm of knowledge (*scientia*) and certainty lies in intuiting relations of agreement or disagreement among clear and distinct ideas. Where intuition cannot reveal such relations, demonstrative *reason* might succeed. Barring the availability of demonstrative reason, we can do no better than *presumption* and *judgment*: "The Faculty, which God has given Man to supply the want of clear and certain Knowledge in Cases where that cannot be had, is *Judgment*: whereby the Mind takes its *Ideas* to agree, or disagree; or which is the same, any Proposition to be true, or false, without perceiving a demonstrative Evidence in the Proofs. ... *Judgment*, which is the putting *Ideas* together, or separating them from one another in the Mind, when their certain Agreement or Disagreement is not perceived, but *presumed* to be so" (IV.xiv.3-4).

These continued affirmations on Locke's part change the dynamic of the interpretive problem: they contribute to textual tension that *every* interpretation must reckon with, not just mine. Locke appears, at once, to affirm two incompatible theses -- affirming Stillingfleet's rational idea of substratum, while affirming a foundational role for custom and supposition.⁶⁶ As I shall argue, the apparent tension can be resolved and in a manner consistent with the custom interpretation of Section 2 above.

As I read him, Locke exploits an ambiguity in Stillingfleet's thesis according to which *it is a repugnancy to our conceptions of things, that accidents should subsist by themselves*. I shall hereafter refer to this thesis as the Repugnancy Doctrine. Stillingfleet's statement of the Repugnancy Doctrine can be read in (at least) three different ways:

- (1) It is inconceivable *that* the co-existing items of experience (i.e. those items philosophers call accidents) subsist of their own without a supporting substratum.
- (2) It is inconceivable *how* the co-existing items of experience (i.e. those items philosophers call accidents) subsist of their own without a supporting substratum.
- (3) It is inconceivable that *accidents* subsist of their own without a supporting substratum.

The custom interpretation of Section 2 acknowledges the distinctions between these three inconceivability theses, though commentators have tended to muddle them.⁶⁷

Consider (1). Stillingfleet appears to hold that an affirmation of (1) is required to maintain an appropriate allegiance to the doctrine of the trinity. Granting (1), the existence of substratum is demonstrable from our ideas of the co-existing items that philosophers call accidents or modes. Stillingfleet indeed holds that we have mathematical certainty of the existence of the divine substance *qua substance* (cf. W 4:46). On my account, Locke rejects (1): it is *not* inconceivable *that* the co-existing items of experience -- *qua mere items* -- should subsist of themselves. As will emerge, however, Locke does affirm both (2) and (3), though neither affirmation (nor their conjunction) commits him to (1).

Consider (2). In exposing the custom account of Section 2.2, I argued (in connection with (g), of II.xxiii.1) that Locke holds that the supposition of a substratum stems, in part, from our inability to conceive *how* the co-existing items of experience subsist of their own without a supporting substratum -- "we cannot conceive how they should subsist alone" (II.xxiii.4). This just *is* the thesis in (2). But Locke denies that an inability to imagine/conceive *how* entails an inability

⁶⁶ Ayers is cognizant of these passages and the problems they pose for his non-custom interpretation, but he maintains that Locke does not ground the idea of substratum in custom. "Why then did [Locke] write of 'custom' rather than of reason?" Ayers' answer: "Presumably just because the process he postulated was (like Aristotle's) quasi-inductive ..." (1991, 36-37) But if Locke holds (as Ayers evidently believes) that his appeals to custom are no more than a way of talking about non-custom-based reason, we should expect him to say so. Instead, he treats his repeated insistence of a role for custom as an integral *qualification*.

⁶⁷ Cf. Alexander (1985, 209) and Gibson (1968, ch. 5).

to imagine *that*.⁶⁸ He is quite clear (and in a context of discussing his views of substance) that he thinks it a dubious "rule of reasoning to deny a thing to be, because we cannot conceive the manner *how* it comes to be" (my italics; W 4:462-63). In the *Essay*, he observes that "we cannot conceive *how* any thing but impulse of Body can move Body; and yet that is not a Reason sufficient to make us deny it possible" (my italics; IV.x.19; cf. II.xxiii.28, IV.iii.29). In short, Locke thinks his commitment to (2) does not entail a commitment to (1).⁶⁹

Consider (3), a claim Locke's acceptance of which we have already discussed. Since, where one regards the co-existing items of experience *as accidents*, one ipso facto regards them as supported by a substratum, the thesis in (3) is a mere *trifling* claim. Locke's derision of some philosophical schools for their appeals such claims, as (3), is not owed to its being false, but to its being uninformative. Note too that his own acceptance of (3) does not commit him to (1).

Given my custom interpretation, Locke's account *is* sceptical -- enough so, I believe, to warrant Stillingfleet's suspicions. But Stillingfleet is intellectually outmatched by Locke and never does establish his suspicions. In his every effort to expose that Locke denies (1), Locke outwits him: Locke manages to construe Stillingfleet's poorly stated position in terms of either (2) or (3), thus enabling Locke to assert agreement with Stillingfleet without committing to (1). Given the charges of heresy that lurk, it is understandable that Locke would resort to being cagey.

Consider an example in which Locke construes Stillingfleet's remarks in terms of the trifling claim in (3). Locke writes:

To explain myself, and clear my meaning in this matter: all the ideas of all the sensible qualities of a cherry come into my mind by sensation; the ideas of perceiving, thinking, reasoning, knowing, &c. come into my mind by reflection: the ideas of these qualities and actions, or powers, are perceived by the mind to be by themselves inconsistent with existence; or, as your lordship well expresses it, "we find that we can have no *true conception of any modes or accidents*, but we must conceive a substratum or subject, wherein they are;" i.e. that they cannot exist or subsist of themselves. Hence the mind perceives their 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. (W 4:21; my italics)

Referring to this passage (and parallel texts), Gibson observes that "it seems clear from such passages as these that it is in a necessity of thought that Locke finds an explicit justification of the 'supposition' of a *substratum* ..." (1968, 92) -- a reading that puts Locke in camp with Stillingfleet. But I contend that the reference to the "true conception" of modes or accidents can be understood as referring to the conception of accidents *as accidents*; i.e., the conception of co-existing items as

⁶⁸ Cf. note 48.

⁶⁹ Whereas, if the interpreter does not distinguish (1) and (2), Locke might then appear, as Alexander writes, to be making "the assertion that it is *inconceivable* because logically impossible that qualities should exist without support" (1985, 209).

being supported by a substratum. As such, this is just to render Stillingfleet's remark (with which Locke professes agreement) in light of the trifling claim in (3) -- a reading supported by Locke's reference to "necessary connexion".⁷⁰ The custom interpretation can thus accommodate this kind of text.

Locke's spinning of Stillingfleet's Repugnancy Doctrine in terms of (2) occurs in numerous passages. Early in the first letter to Stillingfleet (W 4:13), Locke writes:

Whether the general idea of substance be one of the first or most natural ideas in our minds, I will not dispute with your lordship, as not being, I think, very material to the matter in hand. But as to the idea of substance, what it is, and how we come by it, *your lordship says, "it is a repugnancy to our conceptions of things, that modes and accidents should subsist by themselves; and therefore we must conceive a substratum wherein they are."*

And, *I say, "because we cannot conceive how simple ideas of sensible qualities should subsist alone, or one in another, we suppose them existing in, and supported by, some common subject." Which I, with your lordship, call also substratum.*

What can be more consonant to itself, than what your lordship and I have said in these two passages is consonant to one another? Whereupon, my lord, give me leave, I beseech you, to boast to the world, that what I have said concerning our general idea of substance, and the way how we come by it, has the honour to be confirmed by your lordship's authority. And that from hence I may be sure the saying, (that the general idea we have of substance is, that it is a substratum or support to modes or accidents, wherein they do subsist: and that the mind forms it, because it cannot conceive *how* they should subsist of themselves,) has no objection in it against the Trinity ... (W 4:13-14; my italics)

In these remarks, we find Locke putting the claim in (2) (the "inconceivable *how*" thesis) along side of Stillingfleet's Repugnancy Doctrine, and then asserting that Stillingfleet is confirming Locke's own account. This is just to remold Stillingfleet's *rational* account in the image of Locke's own claims.

A few pages later, Locke again spins the Repugnancy Doctrine in terms of (2):

Your lordship asks, with concern, "and is this all indeed that is to be said for the being" (if your lordship please, let it be the idea) "of substance, that we accustom ourselves to suppose a substratum? Is that custom grounded upon true reason, or no?" I have said, that it is grounded upon this, "that we cannot conceive *how* simple ideas of sensible qualities should subsist alone, and therefore we suppose them to exist in, and to be supported by, some common subject, which support we denote by the name substance." Which I think is a true reason, because *it is the same your lordship grounds the supposition of a substratum on*, in this very page; even on "repugnancy to our conceptions, that modes and accidents should subsist by themselves." So that I have the good luck here again to agree with your lordship: and consequently conclude, I have your approbation in this, that the substratum to modes or accidents, which is our idea of substance in general, is founded in this, "that we cannot conceive *how* modes or accidents can subsist by themselves." (W 4:18-19; my italics)

⁷⁰ As I read the passage, the relation of *necessary connection* is asserted of accidents (qua accidents) vis-à-vis "inherence or being supported"; the relation of *superaddition* is asserted of "inherence or being supported" vis-à-vis the observed co-existing items (qua mere items) such as the red color of the cherry. As such, the necessary connection claim is trifling. In contrast, I take the superaddition claim to concern the way we come (post-custom) to regard the co-existing items -- viz. *as* ontologically dependent. Locke understands the relation of necessary connection and that of superaddition in very different terms. His various discussions suggest that *x* is superadded to *y* if and only if *x* is not necessarily connected with *y* (cf. IV.iii.6, W 4:31f, 4:293f, 4:460f).

Again, we have Locke equating Stillingfleet's Repugnancy Doctrine with the "inconceivable *how*" thesis, of (2), and then asserting doctrinal agreement between them. Indeed, Locke attributes to Stillingfleet (cf. the long italicized phrase) Locke's own thesis that the affirmation of substratum is a mere *supposition*.

Predictably, Stillingfleet is unsatisfied with Locke's handling of the Repugnancy Doctrine. In the final round of their exchange, Stillingfleet attempts to clarify the difference between Locke's account and Stillingfleet's own *rational* account. He does so by focusing on the *suppositional* element in Locke's account, arguing that where one relies on supposition one thereby lacks the requisite certainty of reason.⁷¹ Locke understands the charge:

Your lordship indeed tells me, that I say, "that in these and the like fashions of speaking, that the substance is always supposed something;" and grant that I say over and over, that substance is supposed: but that, your lordship says, is not what you looked for, but something in the way of certainty by reason. (W:444-45)

Though Stillingfleet is, I believe, zeroing in on the right issues, Locke nonetheless manages to maintain that his account rests on the same ground as Stillingfleet's. Of "what certainty", asks Stillingfleet, does Locke's account avail us? Locke's reply:

The *same certainty* that follows from the repugnancy to our first conceptions of things upon which your lordship grounds the relative idea of substance. Your words are, "it is a mere effect of reason, because it is a repugnancy to our first conceptions of things, that modes or accidents should subsist by themselves." Your lordship then, if I understand your reasoning here, concludes that there is substance, "because it is a repugnancy to our conceptions of things" (for whether that repugnancy be to our first or second conceptions, I think that is all one) "that modes or accidents should subsist by themselves;" and *I conclude the same thing*, because we cannot conceive *how* sensible qualities should subsist by themselves. Now what the difference of certainty is from a repugnancy to our conceptions, and from our not being able to conceive; I confess, my lord, I am not acute enough to discern. And therefore it seems to me, that I have laid down the same certainty of the being of substance, that your lordship has done. (W:445-46; my italics)

Yet again, Locke is very careful to commit himself expressly to nothing stronger than the "how" thesis, in (2), while nonetheless asserting that he and Stillingfleet are in agreement.

A casual reading of these passages might suggest that Locke is embracing Stillingfleet's position. Stillingfleet himself knew better, though he was unable to elicit a confession from Locke. As Stillingfleet seemed to understand, the consequence of Locke's remarks is not to upgrade the certainty of Locke's account of substratum from supposition to demonstrative reason; the effect is to downgrade the certainty which Stillingfleet purports, to that of mere presumption. Far from clarifying that substratum "is necessary in reason", as commentators have maintained, close inspection of these texts reveals, if anything, that Locke goes to great lengths to avoid committing

⁷¹ Cf. note 65, on Locke's account of supposition/presumption.

to anything stronger than (2) or (3). As I argued in Section 2, Locke's account does involve appeals to reason -- specifically, to the appeals suggested in (2) and (3). But *these* appeals are not incompatible with a custom interpretation.

3.2 Do our *very first* ideas carry with them a supposition of a substratum?

Another kind of remark, from Locke to Stillingfleet, can be read as preempting a grounding role for custom in the genesis of the idea of substratum. Locke writes:

So that as long as there is any such thing as body or spirit in the world, I have done nothing towards the discarding substance out of the reasonable part of the world. Nay, as long as there is any simple idea or sensible quality left, according to my way of arguing, substance cannot be discarded; because all simple ideas, all sensible qualities, carry with them a supposition of a substratum to exist in, and of a substance wherein they inhere: and of this that whole chapter is so full, that I challenge any one who reads it to think I have almost, or one jot discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world. (W 4:7; cf. 4:446f)

In a later exchange, Locke clarifies what he means, by 'carry with':

... "by carrying with them a supposition," I mean, according to the ordinary import of the phrase, that sensible qualities imply a substratum to exist in. (W 4:447)

On one reading, Locke is articulating that the intrinsic character of experience is such as to require substratum; that upon entertaining our *very first* ideas -- i.e., even *prior* to the observation of customary co-existences -- we are already in possession of ideas that provide for a demonstration of substratum. If this is the correct reading, the custom interpretation is in trouble. But there is a plausible, alternative reading that is compatible with the custom account.

First, note that Locke cannot mean that substratum is *demonstrable*, since he explicitly refers to the ideas as "carrying with them a *supposition*" (cf. note 65). If what is carried is a mere supposition, then the stated *implication* is no stronger than that afforded by probable reasoning -- viz., that species of probable reasoning that concerns matters "falling not under the reach of our senses" and about which "we can only guess and probably conjecture" (IV.xvi.12).⁷²

Second, the problematic reading assumes that Locke's claim, that "all sensible qualities, carry with them a supposition of a substratum", is meant to apply to our *pre*-custom ideas. In context, however, Locke is not discussing the *genesis* of the complex ideas of particular substances. Rather, he's rebutting Stillingfleet's contention that he (Locke) is one of "the gentlemen of this new way of reasoning" who "have almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world" (W 4:5). Stillingfleet is accusing Locke of wholly rejecting (or, at least, being committed to

⁷² In contrast with my reading, Gibson writes that "the supposition" is not "one which is merely suggested by these elements, but is from the first implied by them" (1968, 92). In the context of Locke's philosophy, I don't know what "from the first" means, if it is not an allusion to necessary connection. But if the connection is necessary, there is no need for mere supposition.

rejecting) any notion of substratum. In his lengthy response, Locke details (among other things) the various textual evidence establishing that he does affirm substratum (even though in the form of a confused supposition of it). In this context, Locke's intention is to establish not genetic details, but evidence of affirmation. As such, Locke points out (in the above block quotation, W 4:7) the implausibility of Stillingfleet's charge since "that whole chapter is so full" of such evidence. Note that the chapter in question (II.xxiii) is *not* full of genetic details; it is, however, full of references to the supposition of substratum -- a supposition which, in the genetic order, comes *subsequent* to the observation of customary co-extensions that ground the supposition.

Such passages are plausibly read in a manner consistent with the custom interpretation advanced in Section 2.⁷³

4. Conclusion

Countless commentators have struggled with Locke's treatment of substratum and his seeming "doubleness of attitude". I have elaborated three aspects of this doubleness of attitude, arguing in each case that the duplicity is only apparent. The first aspect concerns whether Locke rejects or embraces the idea of substratum. I have argued that this appearance of duplicity evaporates upon noticing that Locke's divergent remarks are aimed at divergent philosophical views: Locke rejects the allegations of a *clear, distinct, positive* idea of substratum, while embracing an *obscure, confused, relative* idea. The second aspect concerns the empirical ground of his obscure idea. I have argued that, on Locke's own understanding, his ideational resources *are* capable of grounding such an idea; to wit, that he means to ground the idea in the customary experience of simple ideas that "go constantly together". The third aspect concerns the Stillingfleet exchange and Locke's apparent affirmations of agreement with Stillingfleet's (so-called) rational idea of substratum. I have argued that Locke does not in fact renounce custom in his remarks to Stillingfleet and that the problematic passages are consonant with a custom interpretation.

⁷³ This kind of passage is indeed consistent with the following reading: Locke holds that the effects of custom are so strong that, upon accustoming themselves to supposing a secret substratum (cf. (g) from in II.xxiii.1, discussed in Section 2.2 above), philosophers would continue to presume an unobserved substrate even upon stripping away all but a single, simple idea -- even if there were only one "simple idea or sensible quality left" (as he says). Of course, such passages do not *imply* this reading -- nor does my interpretation require it. But that such passages are consistent with it surely establishes them as consistent with my custom interpretation.

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