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Volume 44, Number 1, février 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400360ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/400360ar>

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Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Dewan, L. (1988). Laurence Foss and the Existence of Substances. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 44(1), 77–84. <https://doi.org/10.7202/400360ar>

LAURENCE FOSS AND THE EXISTENCE OF SUBSTANCES

Lawrence DEWAN

RÉSUMÉ. — À considérer quelques discussions de plutôt "gentille substance" publiées ces dernières années, j'ai noté un "adoucissement" considérable du concept de substance. À cet égard, je tiens Laurence Foss, dans un écrit datant de 1974, pour un adversaire digne de considération. Ma critique rattache sa position à la doctrine du "vieil homme, prisonnier de discours". Je propose une conception différente de la discussion relative à la substance, une conception qui met en honneur et défend nos jugements naturels originaux perçus comme évidents.

SUMMARY. — Looking at a few fairly "substance-friendly" discussions published in recent years, I have noticed a considerable "softening" of the concept. I take as an opponent worthy of consideration Laurence Foss, writing in 1974. I criticize his position, saying it is really the old "man, prisoner of discourses" doctrine. I propose a different conception of discussion of substance, one which honours and defends our original natural judgments taken as evident.

IN RECENT YEARS even writers looking with favour on the concept of substance have sometimes expressed the view that one substance contains many substances. Thus, Andrew Reck says: "Natural substances are complexes... they usually consist of other substances."¹ Mason Myers develops a notion of substance for "physical objects" different from the notion of substance for "persons"; he gives as reason: "A physical object is divisible into physical objects, but while a person's body is divisible in this way, his person is not divisible into persons."² And his position on physical

1. RECK, Andrew J., "Being and Substance", *Review of Metaphysics* 31 (1978), p. 548; cf. also p. 553.

2. MYERS, C. Mason, "The Concept of Substance", *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 15 (1977), p. 518. What I quote *might* be interpreted along lines expressed by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.11.1 — i.e. the distinction between the *simple* unity of spiritual substances (not divided either actually or potentially) and the *compositional* unity of material substances (not divided actually, but only potentially). However, in Myers' case, because of his strongly "considerational" approach, I say he is making a substance consist of a plurality of substances; thus, he says: "The way we conceptually divide the world into physical things seems mainly determined by considerations of practical, aesthetic, and

objects does mean that such substances are composed of substances. However, Laurence Foss is perhaps the most systematic and explicit in this matter. He says: "... substances *are* composed of substances, and the notion of substance is (properly, I contend) relativized..."³ Foss's essay seems to me of particular interest, because of the extent to which it encourages and even obliges the metaphysician to reflect on the peculiar nature of the metaphysical enterprise. Accordingly, I wish to focus on it, and, I would say, to defend the concept of substance against Foss's attack.

1. *The Foss Position*

Foss contrasts two positions on substance. The first, "D 1", he says "seems to be Aristotle's position" and "probably... the position of... the Scholastic tradition". As he states it:

"Here the concept of substance is context- or language- independent. Not only can the existence of substance be unqualifiedly affirmed; relying roughly on the great chain of being of the Platonic tradition, the idea that a substance can be empirically identified is not patently absurd. Thus, in all likelihood, trees: substance as at once an empirical-metaphysical concept." (20)

The second position, which he calls a "counterposition" relative to D 1, and designates "D 2"

"has been to relativize the notion of substance, making its empirical identification wholly contextual, relative to the specification of an object domain (L). Just as we may have different aims in view, we may nurture corresponding universes of discourse, each generating its own foci of energy and attention, its nodes of significance. These determine our substantial cuts. There are substances, but their identification involves contextualization: substance-in-L. And the choice of L is a prudential affair, a matter of ends in view." (20)

Foss's essay consists almost entirely (as to quantity) in the criticism of D 1, with, as complement, the proposing of D 2. However, the paper ends with a resultant proposal of a "transcendental turn", generated, as it were, by the juxtaposition of D 1 and D 2, leading to more comprehensive positions, D 3, D 4. D 4 actually has the character of an argument for the existence of persons and particulars, and for a knowledge of them (to be called "metaphysics"). (21)

biological importance, and it is clear that the physical object which from a certain habitual or natural point of view is a unity, is a plurality from innumerable other possible points of view which are just as valid conceptually as the habitual or natural approach" (517). In this, he has something in common with Foss.

3. Foss, Laurence, "Are there Substances? Another Look at the Classical Substance Concept", *The Personalist* 55 (1974), pp. 5-22, at p. 13 (his italics): to quote more fully, he says: "... substances *are* composed of substances, and the notion of substance is (properly, I contend) relativized in line with what may be formulated as an Existence Postulate. Roughly, this postulate affirms as substantially existing whatever figure as the primitive substantive terms of a discourse that we find indispensable for giving an account of the flow of phenomena." Note, though, that *within* one discourse "substances cannot be composed of substances" (p. 13). — All references to Foss are to this paper, and will generally be made in the body of the article.

D 3 is an intermediate position between D 2 — which is the awareness of the context-dependent character of the concepts D 1 took to be context-independent — and D 4. D 3, while not affirming the existence of persons and particulars, is aware of persons and particulars as pertaining to the requirements of language as such. It is, as it were, the *positive* outcome of the D 2 view of D 1. How was D 2 possible? It (D 2) reveals to us our *grasp* of the requirements of language as such, thus giving a new status to the substance concept. Foss calls such status “a descriptive-metaphysical or transcendental category” (21).

Thus, one might say that Foss aims to show D 1 as naive, and in so doing he relativizes the concept of substance. This, however, is philosophically fruitful, suggesting that we can grasp the laws of language as such. This, in turn, leads us towards (D 4) an affirmation of the actual existence of substances (persons and particulars). We have, in this way, a sort of *experience* of the grounds of our certitude of the existence of substance.⁴ Foss ultimately mentions a *series* which would go further — towards the grounds of D 4. This sounds like a hint of a philosophical theology.

All of the foregoing is involved in Foss’s statement that “discussions of substance” have a “dialectical nature” (20). I am going to oppose this conception of discussions of substance. It is based on his confidence in the validity of his arguments against D 1, and his resultant opinion as to the quality of the state of mind of the philosopher involved in D 1. This in turn provides him with his own view of the philosophical enterprise and the importance of the work undertaken in the formulation of D 2. What I accordingly wish to do is assess Foss’s criticism of D 1.

This criticism can be reduced to one point. There is an ordinary human point of view which focusses upon certain features of experience — trees, animals, human beings. On the basis of this focus, certain other features are considered as secondary: in one direction “parts”, such as leaves, or arms and legs; in another direction “groups” such as forests, or multitudes of animals, etc. However, we also see that other points of view are possible, because they have actually been developed. There are sciences which focus on what for the ordinary outlook are “particles”, such as the atom, etc. There are sciences which focus on the forest or the ecosystem or the biosphere, and treat as parts what the ordinary outlook takes as wholes. There is no non-anthropocentric reason for favouring one of these views over another. D 1 consists in viewing *its* primary foci as having their primacy in themselves, prior to human favouring. D 1 is thus an *error*. It takes for context-independent what is context-dependent.

2. Assessment of the Foss criticism of D 1

Foss asserts that, for the ecologist “the corruption of the plant is no more a ‘substantial change’ than the rose petal falling off the flower is for the horticulturist.

4. Foss, already concerning D 3, says: “Hence it may be that... the existence of substances can be non-relativistically affirmed” (21), but I take this to mean that the “within-a-particular-universe-of-discourse” use of substance, which in D 1 was naively absolutist is now (in D 3) critically absolutist. Thus, it is not the affirmation of the existence of substance the way this is suggested by D 4 (metaphysics).

This is all part of a larger process which the ecosystem (biome) of which the plant is a part is undergoing. The interaction of plant remains with the surroundings is just as integral to the maintainance of the biome as is the give and take of the plant with the same surroundings. Each contributes equally to the continued well-being of the eco-unit. In other words, there seems to be no clear-cut rationale for distinguishing real first substances from apparent ones: forest, tree, leaf, leaf-cell... proceeding both 'upwards' and 'downwards' indefinitely. Each appears to lay *equal* claim to substantiality, to a substantial form. Certainly each is a structured unit, each is susceptible of teleological analysis and each is 'living'" (12-13). (italics mine)

I take exception to "equal claim". Do tree, leaf, and forest really appear to have equal claim to substantiality? And to transport us to what, as it seems to me, is an even more evident area of consideration, that of animals: do elephant and elephant's leg have "equal claim" to substantiality? Doubtless, for some commercial purposes, the elephant might be reduced to its leg, but the particularity of such a "prudential" move is evident to all. Again, the study of elephants includes the study of the unity of the *herd*. Still, I submit that our failure to accord a substantiality to the herd derives from our grasp of the substantiality of the individual elephant, a grasp as of something *evident*.

Foss has confronted us with a "nest" of discourses (or of universes of discourse) (like a "nest" of tables), with no criterion for rating the realism of the discourses. I am immediately reminded of the question: how do you know you are not dreaming? Clearly, the answer: "I see myself wake up" will not do, for there is the problem of the nest of dreams.⁵

My line of reply to Foss is similar to the genuine reply to the dreaming problem. I.e., the experience of the waking state is fundamental, and it is not confused with dreaming. Dreaming is secondary, and consists quite regularly in mistaking appearances for the waking state. It is notable that sometimes we know we are dreaming.

Similarly, the experience of diverse sensible substances is fundamental. Particular scientific endeavours feed on it, while extending our considerations into less readily discernible areas. We can become confused, and allow scientific theorizing to trouble our application of the real principles of our cognitive life.

The work of the metaphysician, as regards those first principles, can consist only in a technique of invitation to look again at what we do, after all, know. Thus, I would say, for example, that Thomas Aquinas' presentation of the human mind's understanding of corporeal things (*Summa theologiae* 1.84-86) is such an invitation. It presents us with a vision of man⁶ developed in the light of the substantiality of sensible things (animals, plants, and minerals). It is on the basis of the substantial being of corporeal substances that the conception of the difference between, and proportion between, substance and accident is developed; that the difference between, and the proportion

5. For a dramatic presentation of a nest of dreams, cf. the poem of Robert W. SERVICE, "The Dreamer".

6. I have focussed on qq. 84-86, but, of course, the whole picture takes one into such other *Summa theologiae* ("ST") questions as 1.76, 79, and 87.

between, the-being-of-things-in-their-own-nature and the-being-of-things-in-the-mind is developed. The completed conception of the human knower (with the consideration and rejection of the divinization of our minds, innate ideas, Platonic and Avicennian spiritualism, etc.) is an encouragement to turn back to the illuminative source, the substantial being found in sensible things.

3. *Substance and Essence*

Discussions of substance regularly involve consideration of form and individual. The form is communicable: it is found in many. Each elephant is an "elephant". Still, to be a substance is to be an individual. "Elephant" has its own proper being only in "this elephant" or "that elephant". Suppose we reserve the term "substance" for the individual, while using "essence" to refer to (substantial) form. The terms "substance" and "essence" are meant to convey to what extent the two are part of the one discussion of substance. Nevertheless, wherever we have a multiplicity of individuals in a species, substance and essence are not altogether identical. Substance includes, besides the essence, that whereby one individual is itself and not the other.

Foss's arguments question our ability to know either species or individual, essence or substance, in the sensible real. In what we quoted earlier, where one was asked to consider parts and wholes, trees and leaves, the argument challenged us to single out concrete substances, individuals.⁷ However, Foss also quite explicitly asks how one is to distinguish "different natures" (14). He tells us: "'Essence', like 'virtual whole' or 'substance' is itself a relative expression..." (19). To do him less injustice, I mention that his discussion includes questions about the possible bases for distinguishing species — morphology, cross-breeding, teleology, etc. All are found insufficient. For the sake of brevity, I will reduce what he says to his use of a scenario proposed by Isaac Asimov, about the accidental coming into being of a nucleic acid molecule "that could somehow bring about the existence of another like itself" (16). Foss says:

"We might speak of the original molecule surviving this process of hatching, according to the dictum: the chicken is the egg's way of perpetuating itself. For the sake of the present argument, momentarily entertain this dictum. Now, generalize it to read: plant and animal life are DNA's way of perpetuating itself, the original DNA entity (for purposes of our story) being cast as that first molecule 'whom' Asimov dramatizes... The relation of original molecule to today's diffuse plurality of its 'parts' is... akin to that of embryo to adult. That the 'adult' in this case is spatially discrete is incidental on the present view" (17).⁸

In such a scenario, with spatial discreteness no indicator of individual distinction, it is clear that neither essence nor substance is a concept with any realistic claim. Clearly, it would do no good to call to Foss's attention that his whole story (like Asimov's) depended on his presenting his molecule in a *hostile environment*, and that thus, it

7. See above, p. 4, quoting Foss, 12-13.

8. Lest anyone think I am taking this scenario more seriously than did Foss, I note that he later (19) calls the one-substance view "theoretically secure".

appears as a particular type of individual engaged in a “strategy” for survival in the face of at least one other individual with a rather different goal. He would simply tell us that that is the “form of discourse”, and that from some other vantage-point those seeming enemies are “one substance”. An infinity of frames of reference is available. We are surely in a nest of dreams, or “discourses”.

Plato identified being with the pure object of discourse,⁹ and so his discourse had at least the claim to access to the real — he had the right to distinguish between a real world and a dream-world, even if we do not agree with his choice. But the proponent of pure “discourse” really has no such right. Indeed, without a position on where being (substance) is to be found, there is really no idea of “discourse”, i.e. representation, available. Either one begins with substance, and substantial diversity, as prior to all discourse, or discourse is quite inconceivable. Any merely “tentative” discourse presupposes the non-tentative, and any merely practical or prudentially-originated discourse presupposes discourse as the expression of knowledge contemplative of reality.

I believe we should distinguish carefully between the problem of substance and that of essence, and that is why I have noted this *fusing* of the issues of species and individual in Foss’s discussion. I will come to that distinction in a moment, but first I wish to suggest that it is the metaphysician’s business to “double back” on *natural* concepts and judgments to show that they are not *all* “flat-earth” errors. We surely do conceive of things as many in kind and in number. Philosophers (or scientists) *very early on* proved unable to accept this. Aristotle’s work is, in part, aimed at honouring the original natural judgment. We ourselves can use various advances in observational capability to confirm it.¹⁰ While far from admitting that the natural judgment was a mistake, we do nevertheless insist that, for its “well-being”, it needs the advantages of reflection.

Both substance and essence are objects of natural intellectual knowledge, but not equally so. First of all, *prior* to our intellectual knowledge, and *cause* of our intellectual knowledge, is sense-knowledge, a vital process of memories and *reasoned*, i.e. *comparative* experience, which has its climax in a perception of the universal-in-the-particular. Sense has as its object, not merely the singular in its singularity, but somehow the universal-in-the-singular, e.g. “this man” or “this animal”. This is to say that the human sensorium is quiddity-oriented. The *anthropos* is by nature *onto-centric*.¹¹

9. I have in mind such a passage as *Phaedo* 99E-100A, the move from sensible things to *logoi*.

10. While the natural judgment is evident in itself, it can be protected to some extent from theoretical onslaught (e.g. pure-flux ontology masquerading as evolutionary science) by the sort of observational advances which have brought about the current debate among evolutionists concerning the role of stability in nature; cf. the literature referred to by CENTORE, F.F., “Is Darwin Dead?”, *The Thomist* 47 (1983), pp. 550-571.

11. Cf. Thomas AQUINAS, *In Posteriorum Analyticorum* 2.20 (ed. R. Spiazzi, Turin, 1955: Marietti, No. 595). On the power of discernment or comparison as running through all our cognitive life, cf. Thomas AQUINAS, *Sentencia libri De anima* 2.27 (in *Opera omnia*, t. 44, 1, Rome/Paris, 1984: Commissio Leonina/Vrin, especially at lines 229-236).

But, to come to intellection, first let us note that intellection itself is a continuation of that cognitive life of *comparison*, of reasoning, of seeing *whither* something *leads*. And that cognitive life is intellection when it moves *beyond experience*. This is true of all intellection, but most especially of what has to do with being and substance. The absoluteness of such objects demands that they be visions of “where experience *leads to*”.¹²

Essence is what first gives life to intellect, and then, by virtue of that first quickening, intellect has a second target of attention: essence-in-the-concrete or substance. This second phase of intellectual vision is of essence as proportionate to its proper *mode of being*. I imagine this along the lines that first we appreciate the completeness, the self-containedness, of the design of the spider, and then we see the proportion it has to *embodiment*.

Our grasp of the universal in the particular, of the essence proportionate to its substantial mode of being, is already a properly *comparative* act of intellection. I.e., the corporeal mode of being is immediately grasped as *dividing* substance into *this* and *that*. Our natural knowledge of “a being” includes the two phases of (1) knowledge of *quiddity*: “what-a-being-is” and (2) knowledge of *mode of being*: “what-a-being-is existing in *this* or *that*”. Thus, *substantial distinction* (as found in sensible, natural being) is an original natural object.¹³

This suggests to me that the knowledge of specific difference is not as primary as the intellectual appreciation of individual diversity. The issue of diversity of individuals or substances is not at exactly the same level of difficulty or evidence as the issue of diversity of species or essences. (An indication of this is the power of the position of Hume vis-à-vis the mind; the argument of Hume concerning causality is rooted in our conviction of the truth that one being is not another, that this is not that.)¹⁴

However, in saying this, I do not wish to impugn our natural knowledge of essential variety. The difficulty with the claim to a knowledge of essential variety is our (philosophical) awareness of the “depth of cut” we are claiming to discern. We are saying we grasp that two forms are *irreducible* ways of being.

I suggest the following. Once we have grasped diversity of individuals in sensible reality, we naturally grasp many other objects in the realm of *mode of being*. Thus, we distinguish *subsistence* and *inherence*. So also, we distinguish *natural being* and

12. Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, q. 6, ad 18. — I might add that of particular importance for the conception of substance is St. Thomas’s discussion, at *In Physicorum* 5.3 (ed. M. Maggiolo, Turin/Rome, 1954, Marietti, No. 664), of substance as having no contrary: a substance, as such, is not the contrary of another substance.

13. The general line of thinking here is based on St. Thomas, *ST* 1.84.7 (ed. Ottawa, 1941: Collège dominicain, 521b44-522a14). The notion of mode of being or existing, as I am using it here, can be found in THOMAS’ *De potentia* 9.2 ad 1; and cf. *ST* 1.12.4. Suggestive also, for what I am saying, is *ST* 1.11.2. ad 4: “... primo cadit in intellectu ens; secundo, quod hoc ens non est illud ens, et sic secundo apprehendimus divisionem...”, i.e. what occurs first to the intellect is “a being”; secondly, that “this being is not that being”, and so secondly we apprehend division.

14. HUME, David, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. IV, part I (in ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford, 1902: Clarendon Press, para. 25, p. 29): “For the effect is totally different from the cause...” and (p. 30): “... every effect is a distinct event from its cause...”

cognitional being. Now, one notices historically how important the distinction between knowers and non-knowers is for our appreciation of diverse *kinds of thing*, essential diversity. *This* difference of form, of all differences in form, seems to have the greatest impression on us. It looks as though the awareness of the diversity of modes of being (*natural being* and *cognitional being*) leads to grasp of the *formal* principle of *mere natural being* as inferior, in the order of being, to the formal principle of *natural being with cognition*. The one form stands to the other as a wholly new development in the line of being as such. This is seen inasmuch as we see in knowledge a “being-in-a-way-all-beings”. The knowing nature thus has an infinity whereby it transcends mere natural beings in the line of being. (Somewhat the same sort of hierarchy is seen in the difference between self-movers and things that are moved only by others, but I suspect that our appreciation of self-motion’s transcendence comes from our appreciation of knowledge as *somehow* implicated in self-motion.)

This kind of hierarchizing reasoning is explicitly presented by Thomas Aquinas,¹⁵ and it seems to me could be already present as a natural spontaneous reasoning — something we *all* see from the start, and which acts as the seed for the tireless proposing of essential differences which the human mind actually undertakes.¹⁶

This line of thinking seems to me to affirm the primacy of our knowledge of the being of sensible things over our knowledge of knowledge, and yet recognizes the crucial role of knowledge of knowledge in our discerning of quidditative variety. I am saying that the natural sequence of natural intelligibles would be: (1) essence, (2) substance(s), (3) inherence, (4) cognition, (5) essential hierarchy.

Since I end with a realm of substance and essence very much dependent (not, of course, as to its being, but as to our knowledge of it) on our grasp of individuals and (with the introduction of cognition) of persons, I might seem to be arriving at the same point as Foss. However, I would say the difference between the two conceptions of discussion of substance is considerable. The one sort of discussion aims to feed on the originally given lights; the other puts all these into question, retreating into what is (as it seems to me) the dead end of “discourses”.

15. *ST* 1.80.1; also 1.14.1, and 1.84.1 and 2.

16. Concerning natural, spontaneous reasoning, cf. Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles* 3.38 (ed. Pera/Marc/Caramello, Rome/Turin, 1961: Marietti, No. 2161), as well as *ST* 2-2.85.1.