Locke, relative ideas, and substance in general

Stewart Duncan

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Locke’s comments about substance in general have long seemed puzzling. I argue in this paper that we can make progress on this issue if we begin by thinking about the idea of substance in general, and in particular by thinking about the fact that Locke calls this a relative idea. ‘Relative idea’ is a technical term for Locke, and he has a theory that explains its meaning, albeit one that’s not clearly stated in the Essay.

Locke discusses our ideas of substances in Essay II.xxiii. He focuses on the ideas of substance kinds, such as ‘Man, Horse, Gold, Water’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.3), and the ideas of body and spirit, but also discusses an idea of what he calls ‘Substance in general’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.3) or ‘Substratum’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.1). Locke invokes this idea as part of his theory of our ideas of substance kinds. An idea of a substance kind such as gold is, Locke thinks, a complex idea that involves the ideas of various qualities of gold and the ‘obscure and relative Idea of Substance in general’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.3).

Discussion of the passages in which the idea of substance in general is de-
scribed often focuses on the question of what substance in general is. One prominent reading says that Locke is concerned with the instantiation of features by things. Thus the substance in general is the bare thing in which the features are instantiated. Jonathan Bennett advocates this first sort of reading, and traces it back to Leibniz’s comments in the *New Essays* (Bennett 1998, 129). Leibniz thinks that Locke’s comments on substance in general are about a subject that is distinct from all the features it supports (Leibniz 1996, 218). One puzzle about such a reading, which I will not pursue here, is that Locke appears to say that substance in general supports those features he calls qualities, but not all features (Bolton 1976, 492-5).

Another prominent reading, advanced for instance by Michael Ayers, says that Locke is not concerned with instantiation, but with the relation of qualities to the hidden internal structures of things. Substance underlies qualities by being the unknown inner features that give rise to those qualities, not by being the bare particular in which qualities are instantiated. In advocating this second sort of reading, Ayers sets up the contrast between the two sorts of reading epistemologically, in terms of the reason why the substance in general is unknowable. On the Leibnizian reading it is unknowable for an ‘a priori reason’, but on Ayers’s reading ‘Locke’s unknown subject [is] unknown just because its nature is contingently unknown’ (Ayers 1991, 2.32). The unknown substance does have features, but they are features we do not know.

The somewhat metaphysical focus of much of the secondary literature on these passages may seem a little odd, because, for all that Locke does touch on metaphysical topics, his explicit focus throughout II.xxiii remains our ideas. Locke is
much more concerned with our ideas of substance and substances than he is with substance and substances themselves. And that’s all in line with his general project in Book II of the Essay of explaining the origins of our various ideas. We certainly can reasonably ask of views in the philosophy of mind and language what their metaphysical implications are, and whether their authors have seen those implications. And we can ask such questions of Locke’s views about mind and language. But to ask them independently of and prior to figuring out his views about mind and language would be to get things backwards. Thus I want to approach Locke’s discussion by starting with what he says about the idea of substance in general, and working towards what he says about substance itself.¹

1 Relative ideas

Now, ‘it is most obscure what the idea of substratum is supposed to be’ (Bolton 1976, 490). Locke describes this idea as ‘no distinct Idea’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.2); an ‘obscure and relative Idea’ (Locke 1975, I.xxiii.3); a ‘confused Idea of something in which they [qualities of which we have ideas] belong, and in which they subsist’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.3); and ‘no clear, or distinct Idea’ (Locke 1975, I.xxiii.4). The idea is obscure, confused, and relative. Locke explains ‘obscure’ and ‘confused’ elsewhere (Locke 1975, II.xxix), but what is a relative idea?

Bennett suggests that Locke is stuck here and cannot make sense of how we can think of substance in general. He describes Locke as a semantic theorist in an impasse. On the one hand, we talk about things that have various qualities; we make sense of such expressions as ‘the
thing or substance that has all the qualities of the orange’, and this seems to be an indispensable part of our conceptual stock-in-trade. On the other hand, Locke cannot see how the supposed idea of ‘thing which . . . ’ or ‘substance in general’ could be made respectable, and he realized that he can’t validate it along the lines he offers for most general terms (Bennett 1998, 133).

However, Locke does try, in the Essay and in his exchange with Stillingfleet, to make the idea of substance in general ‘respectable’. Perhaps he fails, but he has a story to tell.

Locke tells us that the idea of substance is a relative idea, but never gives an explicit account of what relative ideas are. To begin to figure out what Locke means by ‘relative idea’, we should look at his few uses of the phrase in the Essay. In addition to the mention in II.xxiii, Locke says in II.xix that the idea of infinity is a relative idea. Elsewhere he claims that our ideas are all in some sense relative.

Locke discusses a relative idea of infinity in II.xxix.16. The following passage tells us that the relative idea of infinity involves the idea of the relation bigger than, but is not simply that idea.

So that of what remains to be added, (wherein consists the Infinity,) we have but an obscure, imperfect, and confused Idea; from or about which we can argue, or reason with no Certainty or Clearness, no more than we can in Arithmetick, about a Number of which we have no such distinct Idea, as we have of 4 or 100; but only this relative obscure one, that compared to any other, it is still bigger (Locke 1975,
II.xxix.16).

The Index to the Essay has a further mention of relative ideas, when it includes under ‘Idea’ the item ‘Our Is. almost all relative’ (Locke 1975, 731). This refers to II.xxi.3. That section does not explicitly call any ideas relative. It talks, however, of ideas such as the idea of power, which ‘includes in it some kind of relation’ (Locke 1975, I.xxi.3). Indeed, Locke asks, ‘which of our Ideas, of what kind soever, when attentively considered, does not?’ (Locke 1975, I.xxi.3). Thus Locke calls power and other ideas relative. They are not simply ideas of relations, but are ideas that somehow involve relations.

In what way does Locke think that almost all of our ideas are relative? In general, he says that they ‘include some kind of relation in them’ (Locke 1975, I.xxi.3). Thus, for instance, Locke asks of our ideas of sensible qualities such as colours, ‘what are they but the Powers of different Bodies, in relation to our Perception, etc’ (Locke 1975, I.xxi.3)? And a power in one thing to affect another is in some sense a relational feature of the thing with the power. More surprisingly perhaps, ideas of primary qualities are also said to involve relations: ‘For our Ideas of Extension, Duration, and Number, do they not all contain in them a secret relation of the Parts?’ (Locke 1975, I.xxi.3).

To see why Locke thinks that ideas of primary qualities involve relations, take duration as an example, and look at how Locke says that we acquire that idea.

'Tis evident to any one who will but observe what passes in his own Mind, that there is a train of Ideas, which constantly succeed one another in his Understanding, as long as he is awake. Reflection on
these appearances of several Ideas one after another in our Minds, is that which furnishes us with the Idea of Succession: And the distance between any parts of that Succession, or between the appearance of any two Ideas in our Minds, is that we call Duration (Locke 1975, I.xiv.3).

In this case a relation is involved because the idea of duration seems just to be the idea of a relation between ideas in one’s mind. The idea of duration is not relative in the same way in which the idea of red is relative. Locke’s view here is that each idea is relative in some way or another, but not all are relative in the same way. An idea of a relation does not involve a relation in the same way in which an idea of a secondary quality or the idea of substance in general does. And Locke’s thinking that all ideas are relative in some way or other – that is, are somehow connected to relations – does not show that he thinks that all ideas are relative ideas in the narrower technical sense of II.xxiii.

The passage about the idea of infinity, when added to those about substance, does however suggest a basic claim about relative ideas in that narrower technical sense. A relative idea is not simply the idea of a relation, but is a complex idea that includes the idea of a relation. The relative idea of infinity includes the idea of bigger than. The relative idea of substance includes the relation of support that holds between substance and accident.

Those remarks about relative ideas in the Essay are rather brief and do not make Locke’s theory of relative ideas entirely clear. It is helpful here to look back at a view of Hobbes’s, which provides useful background to Locke’s views about
relative ideas. Hobbes begins, as does Locke, with a theory on which we think about things using ideas. However, Hobbes finds that this theory is inadequate for some cases, and introduces a second sort of mental item, by means of which we can think about things of which we cannot have ideas. This Hobbesian view provides some interesting suggestions as to how to read Locke here, and also evidence that it makes historical sense to attribute to Locke the view I eventually will attribute to him - it’s a view that was around at the time and of which Locke was very likely aware, not an anachronistic imposition on Locke’s texts.5

Hobbes contrasts things of which we have ideas with other things of which we can think somehow, but of which we have no ideas. Several of the passages in which Hobbes draws this contrast, such as the following one from his OBjections to Descartes’s Meditations, involve a distinctive example of a man born blind who thinks of fire even though he lacks an idea of it.

It seems, then, that there is no idea of God in us. A man born blind, who has often approached fire and felt hot, recognizes that there is something which makes him hot; and when he hears that this is called ‘fire’ he concludes that fire exists. But he does not know what shape or colour fire has, and has absolutely no idea or image of fire that comes before his mind. The same applies to a man who recognizes that there must be some cause of his images or ideas, and that this cause must have a prior cause, and so on; he is finally led to the supposition of some eternal cause which never began to exist and hence cannot have a cause prior to itself, and he concludes that something
eternal must necessarily exist. But he has no idea which he can say is the idea of that eternal being, he merely gives the name or label ‘God’ to the thing that he believes in, or acknowledges to exist (Descartes 1984, 2:127).

The man born blind cannot, Hobbes thinks, have an idea of the fire, though he can have an idea of the heat he feels near the fire. Hobbes does not explain exactly why that idea of the heat is not an idea of the fire, but presumably the reason lies in the nature of the perception of heat. We often perceive heat without perceiving it as inherent in the hot thing that is its source, without perceiving it as of the hot object. Contrast this with colour: we generally perceive a colour as of the coloured object. One could say that the blind man has an idea of the heat in the air, but Hobbes is interested in the heat in the fire.

Despite lacking an idea of the fire, the man born blind does know that the fire exists and is the cause of the heat he feels. Thus he must somehow be able to think about the fire. Given an idea of the causal relation, and an idea of the relevant effect, heat, he can think indirectly about the cause, the fire. He thinks about the fire as the cause of the heat. We might, to impose some terminology on Hobbes’s description, say that the man has a relative idea of the fire – he thinks about the fire (one relatum) by means of thinking about the relation and the other relatum.

Hobbes’s texts give us a model of relative ideas. There are three things involved – a relation R and its relata x and y. You can think about y, the thing of which you lack an idea, by means of a relative idea that involves the idea of x
and the idea of R. That is, you think about y as the thing that stands in R to x. In Hobbes’s theory the relation R seems always to be causation, but the model could be generalized to include other relations.

We can understand Locke’s talk of relative ideas on the model suggested by Hobbes. In Hobbes’s example the blind man thinks of fire as the thing that causes the heat. Lacking an idea (of the usual sort) of fire, he thinks of it by means of his idea of heat and his idea of the causal relation. On Locke’s view, though we have no idea (of the usual sort) of substance, we can think about substance as the thing that supports the qualities. Thus we can think of the substance by means of the ideas of the qualities and the idea of the relation of support.

That is a plausible way to read Locke’s comments in II.xxiii. Consider the following passages, which say or imply that when we think about substance in general we are thinking about something that is related to the observable qualities, something itself unobserved that supports the observable qualities. Our idea of substance in general is said to be a ‘confused Idea of something in which they [qualities of which we have ideas] belong, and in which they subsist’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.3); substance in general is itself said to be a ‘supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot exist, sine re substante, without something to support them’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.2); we are told that ‘when we speak of any sort of Substance, we say it is a thing having such or such Qualities’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.3); and that ‘the Substance is supposed always something besides the Extension, Figure, Solidity, Motion, Thinking, and other observable Ideas, though we know not what it is’ (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.3).

Hobbes’s model gives us a plausible way to read Locke’s comments in II.xxiii.
However, because Locke says so little there, someone might reasonably doubt whether that is really Locke’s view. We have another good source though: Locke’s exchange with Stillingfleet.

2 Locke and Stillingfleet

In chapter ten of his Discourse, in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity, Stillingfleet sets out to answer ‘The Objections against the Trinity in Point of Reason’. In this discussion he objects to some of Locke’s comments about substance in the Essay. Stillingfleet’s attacks are founded in part upon his reading of Locke’s views about the formation of ideas.

Then it follows, That we can have no Foundation of Reasoning, where there can be no such Ideas from Sensation, or Reflection.

Now this is the Case of Substance; it is not intromitted by the Senses, nor depends upon the Operations 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. For they not only tell us That we can have no Idea of it by Sensation or Reflection; but that nothing is signified by it, only an uncertain Supposition of we know not what. And therefore it is parallel’d, more than once, with the Indian Philosophers, He knew not what; which supported the Tortoise, that supported the Elephant, that supported the Earth;
so Substance was found out only to support Accidents. And, That when we talk of Substance we talk like Children, who being ask’d a Question, about somewhat which they know not, readily give this satisfactory Answer, that it is Something (Stillingfleet 1697, 234-5).

Stillingfleet begins here by describing something like the Lockean view that our ideas have their ultimate sources in sensation and reflection. (As we’ll see, Stillingfleet in fact seems to have in mind the view that all ideas have their immediate sources in sensation or reflection. In the gap between this view and Locke’s actual view lie some resources for a Lockean response to the criticism here.) Stillingfleet then argues that this view about the origin of ideas has led its proponents to have ‘almost discarded Substance out of the reasonable part of the World’ (Stillingfleet 1697, 234).

Beginning his response to that criticism, Locke quotes the above attack. He then establishes that he is one of those whom Stillingfleet has in mind, one of those ‘gentlemen of this new way of reasoning’ who ‘have almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world’ (Locke 1997, 3.5). (One of Locke’s persistent complaints in his exchange with Stillingfleet is that he’s being criticized for things he does not believe, just because he shares some other views with the objects of criticism – in particular because John Toland, author of Christianity Not Mysterious, held Lockean views about ideas.)

Having established that he himself is one of the targets of Stillingfleet’s criticism, Locke asks what Stillingfleet means by saying that Locke and others have ‘almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world’. Stillingfleet
might mean that Locke denies that substance exists. Locke disputes that reading of the "Essay," citing several passages to show that he does not there deny that substance, something over and above observable qualities, exists (Locke 1997, 3.5-7). Stillingfleet might mean something else though – that Locke thinks that we have only an uninformative idea of substance. Locke endorses this reading of the "Essay" (Locke 1997, 3.7-8). He also argues that he is far from alone in thinking that our idea of substance tells us little about what substance itself is.

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. So that I do not see but Burgersdicius, Sanderson, and the whole tribe of logicians, must be reckoned with “the gentlemen of this new way of reasoning, who have almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world” (Locke 1997, 3.8).

In their logic books, both Burgersdijck (Burgersdicius) and Sanderson have chapters on substance. The chapters have similar structures. Each begins with some general statements about substance, then explains the distinction between primary and secondary substance, and finally explains six properties traditionally attributed to substances. And in each case the initial general statements do indeed
resemble Locke’s statements about substance in the *Essay*. Thus Burgersdijck’s ‘Theorema I’ is that ‘*Substantia est ens per se subsistens, & substans accidentibus*’ (Burgersdijck 1637, 15). And Sanderson begins his chapter by claiming that ‘*Substantia est ens per se subsistens: estque omni accidente prior ordine, natura, & cognitione; eique substat, sustentando ipsum*’ (Sanderson 1640, 31).

Locke then emphasizes that to say that about the idea of substance is not at all to deny that there is such a thing as substance (Locke 1997, 3.8-9). Let us be clear then. Locke does not deny that substance exists. He does think that our idea of substance is not a very good idea.

However, how can we manage to have even this idea? For all that his expression is hard to follow – indeed, for all that he may have misunderstood Locke – Stillingfleet seems to be on to something here. Nothing in Locke’s account of the origin of ideas would seem to account for the origin of the idea of substance. Certainly it appears not to come straight from sensation or reflection. Now, Locke does not think all ideas come straight from either of those two sources. Indeed Locke emphasizes this point, thinking that Stillingfleet has misunderstood him, in the *Letter* (Locke 1997, 3.11). However, Locke does owe us an account of how we can form the idea of substance by operating on the materials we get from sensation and reflection – by compounding, abstracting, and so on. Locke often pays considerable attention to explaining how his system has the resources to explain the presence of various ideas in our minds. That is indeed the organizing project of Book II of the *Essay*. So what is the relevant story about the idea of substance?

The chapter on substance tells us how we come up with ideas of substance kinds and how those ideas differ from complex ideas of non-substantial things. It
does not tell us, though, how we come up with the idea of substance in general. Locke, in replying to Stillingfleet, still needs to answer this question. Does he so?

He does sketch an answer. Thus he says

I never said that the general idea of substance comes in by sensation and reflection; or, that it is a simple idea of sensation or reflection, though it be ultimately founded in them: for it is a complex idea, made up of the general idea of something, or being, with the relation of a support to accidents (Locke 1997, 3.19).

Just a little later he says

I never denied, that the mind could frame to itself ideas of relation, but have showed the quite contrary in my chapters about relation. 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 a thing or something, is all that is left to be the positive idea, which has the relation of a support or substratum to modes or accidents; and that general indetermined idea of something, is, by the abstraction of the mind, derived also from the simple ideas of sensation and reflection: and thus the mind, from the positive, simple ideas got by sensation or reflection, comes to the general relative idea of substance; which, without the positive simple ideas, it would never have (Locke 1997, 3.21-2).
Remember Hobbes’s story, which helps illuminate the above text. You conceive of something of which you lack an idea as the thing that stands in a certain relation to another thing of which you do have an idea. Thus for the man born blind fire is the thing that stands in the relation of causation to heat, of which he has an idea. Now, the idea of the thing that stands in relation R is intuitively an idea made up of two parts: the idea of a thing and the idea of relation R. And that is just what Locke has pointed out here. The relation has a different name – it is support, whatever that may be – but the general model is the same. The relative idea of substance in general is the complex idea of the thing that supports the accidents. That passage from Locke’s response to Stillingfleet, in which Locke tells us how we form the relative idea of substance in general, gives some further confirmation of my reading of Locke. The relative idea is made by compounding two other ideas: the idea of thing and the idea of the relation of support. So now we need accounts of how we acquire those two ideas. Locke thinks we get the idea of thing by abstraction. It is not obvious that that account works. One may well worry that, after abstracting away from so many aspects of an idea, nothing at all will be left, rather than the bare idea of a thing. However, this is a general worry about Locke’s account, rather than a particular worry about what he says about the relative idea of substance. Locke would need an account of our ideas of thing and being anyway, even if he did not think we had a relative idea of substance in general. A more specific worry, and the one on which I will focus here, is about the idea of the relation of support.
3 The relation of support

The relation of support, and our idea of it, are rather mysterious. It is supposed to be the relation that holds between observable qualities and the unobservable substance. Locke says little about the relation though, and does not even describe it with one consistent term. As Margaret Wilson notes, ‘while Locke does occasionally say that qualities ‘result from’ substance, he also repeatedly speaks of substance as ‘supporting’ qualities, of qualities ‘subsisting in’ and ‘inhering in’ it’ (Wilson 1993, 581). The first two descriptions suggest something closer to a causal relationship between substance and qualities than do the other two.

The descriptions of the relation of support in II.xxiii look, then, to be ambiguous. Is there any reasonable way to resolve this ambiguity, or should we just conclude that Locke’s text is muddled (Mackie 1976, 76)? Moreover, how does Locke suppose we form the idea of the relation of support? There is a genuine puzzle here.6

In order to form the idea of the relation of support in a way that accords with Locke’s psychology, we would need to experience a situation in which we experienced both relata. Having formed the idea of the relation of support from experience of such a situation, we could then use the idea of support as part of the relative idea of a supporting thing. However, is no situation in which we have ideas of both a substance in general and its qualities, because we have no idea of substance in general (aside from the relative idea of it, which is insufficient for this purpose). So how do we form the idea of the relation of support?

The puzzle about how we can form the idea of the relation of support appears
to be especially pressing if we suppose that support is inherence in a logical substratum. For it is impossible – certainly given Locke’s view of experience – for us to have an experience of that substratum, let alone to have simultaneous experience of that substratum and of the qualities that exist in it. There is no Lockean way for us to acquire the idea of this inherence relation.

If, however, Locke thinks of the relation between substance in general and qualities as causation, then he has a way out of the problem, for he already has an account of how we form the idea of cause.

In the notice, that our Senses take of the constant Vicissitude of Things, we cannot but observe, that several particular, both Qualities, and Substances begin to exist; and that they receive this their Existence, from the due Application and Operation of some other Being. From this Observation, we get our Ideas of Cause and Effect (Locke 1975, II.xxvi.1).

So if substance in general is the underlying thing that causes qualities, then Locke can explain how we can form the relative idea of substance in general – it will be the relative idea of the thing that causes the qualities.

Locke’s psychology can make sense of the acquisition of the idea of support if support is causation, but not if support is inherence. If we take Locke to think that support is the inherence of features in a logical substratum, we leave Locke having to say that it’s impossible to form the idea of support. Given Locke’s project in Book II of the Essay, that would be a most embarrassing problem. This tells strongly in favour of a causal reading of support, and thus of understanding
the relative idea of the substance in general as the idea of the thing that causes the qualities of which we have ideas. If that’s so, substance in general must be something more than Bennett’s bare substratum that stands in only the relation of inherence to qualities.

4 Three objections

(1) One might worry that Locke’s example in his discussion of how we acquire the idea of causation is diachronic, but the relation between substance and qualities, even if causal, is synchronic. These two relations, even if both correctly called causal relations, are not obviously the same relation. Locke does, however, introduce an apparent example of a synchronic causal relation into the discussion late in his exchange with Stillingfleet, when he uses an analogy between the support provided by substance in general and the support provided by the foundations of buildings.

He that is satisfied that Pendennis-castle, if it were not supported, would fall into the sea, must think of a support that sustains it: but whether the thing that it rests on be timber, or brick, or stone, he has, by his bare idea of the necessity of some support that props it up, no clear and distinct idea at all (Locke 1997, 3.453).

The foundation that supports a building is causally responsible for the building’s not falling down. At least, we use the language of causal explanation here: ‘Why did this building fall down when that one didn’t? Because this one was
build on sand, but the other was built on a rock.’

Thus we see that, when Locke tries here to explain the relation of support between substance and accident, he uses an analogy that involves synchronic causal support.\(^9\) Now, perhaps this is meant as a very loose analogy, and all we are meant to take away the truth of a certain counterfactual – ‘the thing supported would not exist in its current state if the support were absent’. Certainly some aspects of the support relation in the castle example do not apply to the substance example: the substance in general is not literally, spatially underneath the qualities it supports. Nevertheless, that Locke uses this example as he does suggests that he has a causal relation in mind. Moreover, if Locke thinks that support is causation then Locke has resources to explain how we get an idea of a relation of support.

(2) The reading of support as inherence is incompatible with Locke’s psychology. However, a defender of that reading might respond, Locke himself says that the idea of substance is incompatible with his psychology, so the incompatibility I’ve pointed to does not count as evidence against the inherence reading, and may indeed count as evidence for it. For Locke in Essay I.iv.18 talks about “the Idea of Substance, which we neither have, nor can have, by Sensation or Reflection”, apparently saying that we cannot acquire the idea of substance in general according to Locke’s theory of the acquisition of ideas.\(^10\) It’s worth, however, looking at the whole of that section.

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 ourselves: 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 distinct positive) *Idea*, which we take to be the substratum, or support, of those *Ideas* we do know (Locke 1975, I.iv.18).

Locke does seem to suggest at the start of this section that we don’t have an idea of substance, though it would be nice if we did. However, he does not in fact conclude that we have no such idea, just that we have no ‘clear’ idea, ‘no particular distinct positive’ one. So Locke is not saying that it would be useful if we had an idea of substance (as people often seem to think they do) rather than lacking an idea of substance as we do. Rather Locke is saying that it would be useful if we had a clear idea of substance (as people often seem to think they do) rather than the unclear one we actually have. Indeed, though Locke does not use the phrase ‘relative idea’ here, this passage fits well with taking that Locke’s thought to be that there’s no positive idea of substance, just a poor relative one. And thus Locke isn’t really saying here that he can’t fit the idea of substance into his picture at all, isn’t really saying there’s an incompatibility between his psychological theory and our having an idea of substance. Thus *Essay* I.iv.18 does not really support the reading of support as inherence.
(3) The defender of the inherence reading of support might also appeal to passages beyond the Essay, such as the following one from Locke’s second reply to Stillingfleet. Here Locke, like Hobbes, illustrates his points with an example involving the thoughts of a blind man.

To show a blind man he has no clear and distinct idea of scarlet, I tell him, that his notion of it, that it is a thing or being, does not prove he has any clear or distinct idea of it; but barely that he takes it to be something, he knows not what. He replies, that he knows more about it than that; v.g. he knows that it subsists or inheres in another thing: “and is there no difference, says he in your lordship’s words, between the bare being of a thing, and is subsistence in another?” Yes, say I to him, a great deal; they are very different ideas. But, for all that, you have no clear and distinct idea of scarlet, nor such a one as I have, who see and know it, and have another kind of idea of it besides that of inherence (Locke 1997, 4.450)

Locke uses the language of inherence to describe the relation he also calls support. This, in addition to similar texts in the Essay itself, suggests that we cannot simply conclude that Locke’s relation of support was causal. However, even if this passage was straightforward evidence for the inherence reading, it would not be conclusive evidence for it, just because of all the evidence in favour of taking support to be causation. Moreover, this passage is not in fact straightforward evidence for taking support to be inherence. At least, it’s not clearly persuasive evidence. For when Locke says “subsists or inheres in”, it’s not really clear what he
means. Though ‘inheres’ obviously suggests the inheritance reading, what Locke means by ‘inheres’ is not beyond contention. What Locke means by ‘subsists’ is even more open to question. This is a word that Locke uses throughout these discussions without explanation. Indeed, understanding what the relation of support is basically just is understanding what Locke means by ‘subsists’. And as I have argued above, there is good reason to think that Locke is picking out a causal relation when he talks about supporting, subsisting, and the like. Thus the evidence provided by this passage is, at best, confused.

5 Conclusion

Locke has a theory of relative ideas. A relative idea is a genuine sort of idea for Locke, one that allows us to think about the world in a particular sort of way. And saying that we have a relative idea of something is not just a way of concealing that Locke has nothing to say on the topic. A relative idea of substance in general is the idea of the underlying thing that causes the observable qualities of a substance.

The passages cited in section 4, and some phrases in Essay II.xxiii, do suggest the inherence reading. It is undeniable that there is some evidence for that view. However, given the constraints imposed by Locke’s psychology, it appears that support simply cannot be inherence for Locke, so readings such as Bennett’s cannot be correct. Locke is discussing how we think about substance. And we can only think about substance using ideas we can have. Since Locke’s views allow no possibility of acquiring an idea of the relation of inherence in a bare substratum, that cannot be the relation he thinks we’re employing in our relative idea of
Understanding Locke’s theory of relative ideas allows us to understand Locke’s view about the idea of substance in general. That, in turn, tells us how Locke thinks we think about substances. What we do, he says, is “suppose” that there is some such underlying thing, causing the qualities of the substance to be what we are (Locke 1975, II.xxiii.2). That is, in viewing and interacting with the world, we take substances to have a certain structure, in which observable qualities are caused by something underneath. We may very well not be able to say anything about what that thing is. Or, like the man who thinks the world is carried around by an elephant atop a turtle, we may be able to say something, but not to give an answer that’s fully satisfying, even to ourselves.

This view, on which substance-in-general causes qualities, is the implicit metaphysical theory that Locke thinks we suppose the world has. We might, indeed, go so far as to call it Locke’s metaphysical theory. It’s not that he’s offering some argument for it here. Rather, he accepts that he like everyone else supposes the world to have this structure, and he makes no effort to persuade us that the world does not have this structure. Seeing this, we can progress towards Lockean metaphysics from the investigation of Locke’s theory of relative ideas. The internal structure of substance is, for Locke, not a matter of bare substratum and inherence. The key internal structure is, rather, causal.
References


Notes

1This is not, of course, the first paper to approach Locke’s discussion in this way. In notes 6 and 7 below I discuss some key differences between my interpretation and those of Newman (2000) and Bolton (1976), both of which take a somewhat similar overall approach.

2Bennett (2001) revisits the interpretation of Bennett (1998) without giving any new argument for it. Locke, says Bennett in the later work, 'tolerates it [the relative idea] only because he thinks we are stuck with it' (Bennett 2001, 2.277).

3That is, Locke has a theory of the idea of substance in general. His having such a theory is consistent, however, with his not thinking that the notion of substance explains much about the structure of the world. On that topic, see McCann (2001).

4Locke himself was the author of the Index to the Essay. He wrote about this to Edward Clarke on 19 March 1694: ‘I intend to make an analytical index to the book, for I would have this [second] edition as useful to all sorts of readers as it can, and I hope it will be of some’ (Locke 1979, 36). The Index was indeed added in the second edition.

5The expansion of a fundamentally imagistic theory of ideas by the addition of some sort of relational thought didn’t stop with Locke, of course. Berkeley’s notions provide one example, and Hume’s relative ideas, which figure prominently
in the debate over the ‘New Hume’, another.

6This is a good place to note some differences between my reading and that of Newman (2000). We agree that Locke has the positive view that there is an obscure and relative idea of substance in general, and isn’t trying to mock and abandon all talk about underlying substance. Our accounts try to answer different sets of questions, in that I focus on the inner structure of the relative idea, but Newman focuses on its origin (which is, he argues, in custom rather than reason).

7This points to one of two main differences between my reading and that argued for in Bolton (1976). I think that the idea of the relation of support is the idea of causation, the acquisition of which is explained by Locke elsewhere. Bolton argues that the underlying substance is connected to qualities by laws of nature (Bolton 1976, 505), which introduces the further puzzle of how Locke supposes we can acquire this idea. A second main difference is over whether there’s an unresolved inconsistency between what Locke says about the idea of substance in general and his views about the acquisition of ideas (see the discussion of Essay I.iv.18 below). Bolton says that ‘Locke does not indicate how he would resolve the inconsistency in his doctrines’ (Bolton 1976, 502), and I have in effect argued that Locke does indicate the resolution.

8This does not settle exactly what the underlying substance is – for instance, it does not settle the relationship between substance in general and real essence.

9Another of Locke’s examples, that of a man who has an idea of a cedar of Lebanon, uses a similar analogy to a causal sort of support. ‘Your lordship has
the idea of subsisting by itself, and therefore you conclude you have a clear and distinct idea of the thing that subsists by itself; which methinks is all one, as if your countryman should say, he hath an idea of a cedar of Lebanon, that it is a tree of a nature to need no prop to lean on for its support, therefore he hath a clear and distinct idea of a cedar of Lebanon: which clear and distinct idea, when he comes to examine, is nothing but the general one of a tree, with which his indetermined idea of a cedar is confounded’ (Locke 1997, 3.450-1).

10 See Bolton (1976, 502), but also Newman (2000, 298).

11 Note that that comes right before the cedar of Lebanon passage referred to in note 9 above, which shows if nothing else that the confusing nature of Locke’s treatment of this issue is not confined to the Essay.

12 There is also, as a consequence, some evidence for Mackie’s view that the text of the Essay confuses two issues, which Mackie calls the ‘argument for a substratum’ and the ‘argument for . . . a central core’, and which correspond to the inherence and causal readings of ’support’ that I have discussed (Mackie 1976, 77).