IN DEFENSE OF SUBSTANCE

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Summary
In his “Farewell to Substance: A Differentiated Leave-Taking”, Peter Simons reaches the provocative conclusion that the concept of substance, as it is employed by metaphysicians, has become obsolete, since in the end there may be nothing at all which answers to it. No harm is done, Simons allows, if we continue to retain an everyday notion of substance, as long as we are aware of the limitations of this practice: there is no reason in general to expect that what is salient from our specifically human point of view will retain a special place in light of our most considered scientific and metaphysical theories of the world. In this paper, I argue that, contrary to Simons’ pessimistic outlook, the concept of substance continues to retain its importance for metaphysics. Among the primary explanatory roles played by the concept of substance in metaphysics is its use in designating certain kinds of entities as occupying a privileged position relative to a particular ontology. But disputes over substancehood can also target the criteria themselves relative to which an ontologically privileged position is awarded to certain taxonomic categories. In these uses, we see the concept of substance employed in an absolute, a relational and a comparative sense, to designate items as substances simpliciter, as the substances of something else, or as more or less deserving of substance status.

* I am very honored to be able to contribute to a volume which celebrates the work of Peter Simons. I have learned much of what I know about mereology from Simons’ monumental work, Parts: A Study in Ontology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), which I have come to regard as the “bible of mereology”. The painstaking efforts Simons took to familiarize the rest of us with foundational issues in mereology and their applications to central philosophical problems have paid off tremendously in placing questions concerning parts and wholes at the forefront of many current debates in metaphysics. Since it is an accepted practice in analytic philosophy to show one’s respect and admiration for a philosopher by subjecting his or her work to vigorous criticism, I follow this tradition here by giving Simons’ views concerning substance a run for their money.
1. Introduction

In his “Farewell to Substance: A Differentiated Leave-Taking”, Peter Simons argues for a provocative position concerning the usefulness and importance of the concept of substance for metaphysics:

Future metaphysics worthy of the name will need to be revisionary, and the concept substance will feature within it, at best, as a derivative construct. It is premature to say how such a future revisionary metaphysics will look, but it will need to both accommodate the advances of science as well as provide the platform for showing how we and our commonsense knowledge, including the knowledge of what have been thought of as individual substances, have a place within the same overall scheme. Substance will not be simply discredited, but its role as a fundamental metaphysical primitive is gone forever. Its formal moments, the notions of independence, of persistence, of unity and integrity, of discernibility, will need to be taken account of, but they will be analytical factors out of which the everyday notion is obtained, probably with some admixture of epistemological content in order to match the notion to its paradigm examples. (Simons 1998, 250)

Simons’ verdict is certainly surprising, given the centrality of the concept of substance across the history of Western philosophy. The notion of substance plays an important role throughout the ancient, medieval and modern period, in the works of philosophers as diverse as Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Hume and Kant. Even in contemporary metaphysics, the concept of substance has experienced something of a revival, particularly in recent work by neo-Aristotelians and others writing on fundamentality, grounding, ontological dependence, essence, real definition and related notions.¹ It is therefore worth looking back to the considerations which prompted Simons to conclude that “there is no place for a fundamental concept of substance within [revisionary metaphysics], although aspects of the concept are likely to find their place therein” (ibid., 235).