

[*“Distinction between Substance and Attribute”* by Gordon H. Clark. Date unknown. - DJD]

1

The distinction between substance and attribute is not a particularly enlightening one. Originally the concept of substance was derived from the attempt to discover what really existed. The world of flux was supposed to be unreal, or at most, only half real. [an appearance or modification of some permanent substratum] According to Plato, the immutable ideas alone were real. Only ideas existed.

This implies that men and horses and trees do not truly exist because they are not permanent. All visible objects change and therefore cannot exist. Existence presupposed permanence.

2

For modern common sense it seems ridiculous to deny existence to men and horses and trees. Therefore, let the argument begin with the assumption that visible things exist. This implies, however, that existence does not connote permanence, for obviously no visible thing is permanent. But, if this is so, distinctions between substance and attribute based on the antithesis between permanence and change disappear. Further, in this common sense view, brown and yellow, bitter and sweet, heavy and light, exist just as really as do men and horses. Dreams also exist, and so do mirages.

3

Dreams are real: they are real dreams. Justice, love, anger, power, jealousy, knowledge, and ignorance exist. But these, so well as brown and yellow, are usually considered attributes, rather than substances. Therefore neither permanence nor existence can be taken as the criterion of substance in distinction to attribute.

If now it be said that brown cannot exist by itself, but must attach to a horse or a man, whereas a horse or a man can exist independently, one will find that this attempt likewise fails.

4

Brown admittedly can exist apart from this particular horse. It can be another horse that is brown. But even so it seems that brown cannot exist apart from some horse or brown thing. Yet the horse is no more independent than brown. Of course this horse does not have to be brown: it may be black. However, no horse cannot exist independently of some color, just as color cannot exist without some horse or other brown thing. Neither is independent, and this criterion of substance versus attribute fails.

5

Similarly, in theology omnipotence cannot exist without God, and neither can God exist without omnipotence. Hence independent existence cannot be the criterion of substance in opposition of attributes.

Unity, also used as a criterion of substance is no better than existence and permanence. For every so-called attribute is a unit, and in many cases more of a unit than the “substance” to which it is attached.

If furthermore God is as abs. simple as some say, he cannot have attributes, i.e. his substance and his attributes are identical.