

FRANCISCO SUÁREZ, BETWEEN MODERNITY AND TRADITION

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RESUMEN

El artículo presenta dos líneas de investigación. La primera, de naturaleza histórica, considera la relación de la filosofía de Suárez con el agustinismo filosófico, en particular con Enrique de Gante y Duns Escoto. Esta sección concluye afirmando que este influjo es la principal causa de las diferencias entre Suárez y Tomás de Aquino. En efecto, en la medida que Suárez acepta determinados conceptos del agustinismo filosófico, que fue el principal inspirador de la condena parisina del Aquinate en 1277, se pone en desacuerdo con Tomás de Aquino. La segunda línea de investigación estudia algunos aspectos del sistema filosófico desarrollado en las *Disputationes metaphysicae*, concluyendo que: 1) su concepto de sustancia material se asemeja a lo que Descartes llamará posteriormente *res extensa*; 2) su concepto de accidente abre el camino de un cierto fenomenismo moderno; 3) su teoría actualista del ser, al negar la existencia de la potencia y, por lo tanto, la distinción real entre la esencia y el *esse*, posibilita la reducción racionalista del ser a esencia, así como la reducción de la esencia al estado de un concepto objetivo o, para decirlo en otros términos, a la objetividad racional.

Palabras clave: agustinismo filosófico, Enrique de Gante, Duns Escoto; Descartes, Kant; material y forma, sustancia y accidentes, esencia y *esse* (acto de ser), acto y potencia.

ABSTRACT

The article pursues two lines of investigation. The first line of investigation is historical in nature and considers the relation between the philosophy of Suárez and Philosophical Augustinianism: in particular his relation with Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus. This section concludes that this influence is the main explanation for the differences between Suárez and Thomas Aquinas. In fact, insofar as Suárez accepts certain influences from Philosophical Augustinianism, which was the main inspiration of the 1277 condemnation of Aquinas in Paris, he puts himself at odds with Thomas. The second line of investigation considers some aspects of the philosophical system he works out in the *Disputationes metaphysicae*, concluding that: 1) his concept of physical substance is virtually akin to what Descartes will call *res extensa*; 2) his concept of accident paves the way for a certain strand of modern phenomenism; 3) his actualist theory of being, by denying the existence of potency, and therewith the real distinction between essence and *esse*, paves the way for the rationalist reduction of being to essence alone, and of essence to the status of an objective concept or, to put it another way, to rational objectivity.

Keywords: philosophical Augustinianism, Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus; Descartes, Kant; matter and form, substance and accident, essence and *esse* (act of being), act and potency.

Since it is impossible to comprehensively compare two philosophical systems in the limited space of an article, our goal in this paper is restricted to two points: to indicate the discontinuity between Thomas Aquinas and Francisco Suárez on certain key issues and to show how Suárez's thought prepared the way for certain fundamental characteristics of modern philosophy.

A useful preliminary and synthetic vision of the philosophies of the two authors is available in the article, *Tesi di Tommaso d'Aquino e di Francisco Suárez*¹, which lists and compares the 24 *Thomist theses* published by the Sacred Congregation for Studies on 27 July 1914², and the 24 theses attributed to Suárez

1 Appendix of Jesús Villagrasa, ed., *Neotomismo e suarezismo: Il confronto di Cornelio Fabro* (Rome: APRA, 2006), 165-178. The theses are listed in both Latin and Italian.

2 Cf. AA.VV., *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 6 (1914) 383-386.

by L.G. Alonso Getino³. References on Aquinas are available in the well-known study of E. Hugon⁴, while those for Suárez in the article of Getino.

It is easiest to understand our objectives of research within a historical framework, and we thus begin with a brief comment on certain historical questions.

I. FRANCISCO SUÁREZ: A MIDPOINT BETWEEN THOMIST ARISTOTELIANISM AND CERTAIN AUGUSTINIAN-FRANCISCAN PHILOSOPHICAL CURRENTS

J. Iturrioz has already highlighted the fact Suárez was deeply influenced by the work of his predecessors⁵. The monumental *Disputationes metaphysicae*, for example, is markedly eclectic in nature and includes no less than 7.718 citations from 247 authors. While this fact already tells us much about the style of Suárez’s philosophy, it also allows us to identify the principal schools of thought that shaped and inspired his work. Principal among these are Thomist Aristotelianism (which is cited the most often), the so-called *Second Scholasticism*, Philosophical Augustinianism, the Fathers of the Church, Platonism and Nominalism. The table below presents the exact number of quotes in the *Disputationes metaphysicae* from each of these schools and their various representatives.

1. Thomist Aristotelianism	2. Second Scholasticism	3. Philosophical Augustinianism	4. Other schools: The Fathers, Platonism, Nominalism	Frequency
1. Aristotle				1735
2. Thomas Aquinas				1008
		3. Duns Scotus		363
			4. Augustine	334
	5. Cajetan			299
	6. Soncinas			192
			7. Averroes	179
	8. Durando			153
	9. Ferrariense			124

3 Cf. Luis González Alonso-Getino, “El centenario de Suárez”, *La Ciencia Tomista* 15 (1917): 381–390.

4 Édouard Hugon, *Les vingt-quatre thèses thomistes* (Paris: Téqui, 1946).

5 Cf. Jesús Iturrioz, *Estudios sobre la metafísica de Suárez* (Madrid: Ediciones Fax, 1949), 147–148.

	10. Capreole			115
	11. Fonseca			114
	12. Iavello			97
			13. Albert the Great	96
		14. Henry of Ghent		95
			15. Plato	92
			16. Gregory of Rimini	90
			17. Gabriel Biel	86
			18. Avicenna	84
		19. Giles of Rome		78
			20. Herveo Natalis	77
	21. Domingo di Soto			75
		22. Alexander of Hales		71
			23. Damascene	71
			24. Ockham	67
			25. Dionysius the Areopagite	56
			26. Alexander of Aphrodisias	52
	27. Aureolus			46
			28. Simplicius	41
	29. Antonius Andreas			40
		30. Bonaventure		38
			31. Marsilius of Inghen	37
			32. Anselm of Canterbury	36
		33. Ricardus de Mediavilla		34
			34. Boethius	33

Our interest for the moment lies primarily in investigating the influence that Philosophical Augustinianism –and in particular the thought of Duns Scotus and Henry of Ghent– had on the thought of Francisco Suárez. In order to do this we

will first identify certain themes that are characteristic of the Augustinian-Franciscan school, and then examine to what extent these influenced the philosophy of the *Doctor Eximius*. This analysis will then enable us to understand why Suárez distanced himself from Thomas on key issues.

1. Medieval Augustinianism

While the Philosophical Augustinianism that had dominated Europe for centuries was in decline by the time Suárez assumed his role as *magister* in philosophy and theology, it was far from dead. Its continued presence was due in large part to the influence of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham who drew their terminology and fundamental ideas from none other than the Augustinians William of Auvergne and Henry of Ghent. It is well known, for example, that the great universities of Spain, including the University of Salamanca where Suárez studied, divided their philosophy curriculum into Thomist, Scotist, and Nominalist (or Ockhamist) sections, and that even the Dominican ‘Thomists’ of the time believed that it was possible to include Thomas and Scotus into a larger synthesis.

Born as a reaction to the dangers that Aristotelean physics and metaphysics, particularly in their Averroist interpretation, posed to the faith, medieval Augustinianism was not a school of philosophy in the strict sense of the term. It consisted primarily of a loosely organized set of doctrines united by the desire to defend Christian science from what it saw as the profane and naturalistic contamination of Greek-Arab thought. The famous 1277 Paris condemnations, fruit of this new Augustinianism, were thus only a single episode in a much longer and at times markedly bitter encounter between two opposing visions: the sacred sciences, the faculty of theology and the ‘truth of the Gospel’ on the one hand, and philosophy, the faculty of arts, and what appeared to some as ‘ancient paganism’ on the other⁶. In fact, the condemnations of Paris were soon followed by events in England. On 18 March 1277 Robert Kilwardby, the Bishop of Canterbury, and then his successor, John Peckham, on 29 October 1284, condemned not only the errors of Averroism, but also certain alleged errors of Thomas Aquinas. Principal among these were Thomas’ theses on the unicity of the substantial form and, as a consequence of this, of the reality of prime matter in the strict sense, i.e. as a matter that was pure potency without any actuality. All of this shows how medieval Augustinianism, and Scotism

6 Cf. Ferdinand van Steenberghen, *La philosophie au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain-Paris: Éditions de l’Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1991), 424 and Étienne Gilson, *La filosofia nel Medioevo* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1978), 540.

after it, were largely the efforts of theologians to combat the ‘rationalism’ that they believed had compromised the faculty of arts and which was being aided by Thomism, a rationalism which alleged was destroying the profound relationship between faith and reason, that was a cornerstone of Christian belief.

What then were the central ideas of this current of thought? According to the above-mentioned Franciscan John Peckham, a chief proponent of Philosophical Augustinianism, the movement was characterized by the following positions⁷:

- a) The pre-eminence of the good over the truth, and as a consequence of this of the will over the intellect, with regard to the divine causality (in creation and providence), causality of creatures, human happiness and the nature of *liberum arbitrium*;
- b) Divine illumination as the cause of knowledge and because of this the notion of being (*esse*) as light and of divine being as infinite and uncreated light;
- c) The principle according to which prime matter possesses an actuality of its own independently of the substantial form. From this principle another thesis follows: the multiplicity of substantial forms in an *ens* and hence also in man;
- d) The individuation of the human soul independently of its union with the body;
- e) The impossibility of the creation of the world without a temporal beginning;
- f) The identity of the soul and its faculties;
- g) The interpretation of the sciences (*artes*) and of philosophy as subordinate to sacred science and theology.

Our concern here is to point out the presence of the doctrine of the actuality of prime matter in Philosophical Augustinianism, because it is this idea that most closely resembles the position of Suárez and which marks his departure from the thought of Aquinas. In fact, as we shall soon see, Suárez derives his unique ideas in the fields of the theory of knowledge (Suárez believed, for instance, that an immediate intellectual knowledge of the individual was possi-

7 Cf. John Peckham, “Letter of 1 January 1285, number 625”, in Charles Trice Martin, ed., *Registrum epistolarum fratris Joannis Peckham, archiepiscopi Cantuariensis*, Rolls Series 77, vol. III (London: Longman & Co., 1885), 870-872, where Peckham describes the doctrines disputed by the followers of Augustine and Aristotle.

ble), of metaphysics (he held that prime matter had its own act of being), and of philosophy of nature from this starting point.

In order to investigate how this doctrine arrived to Suárez we need to trace its development in the two Augustinian authors he cites most frequently –Duns Scotus and Henry of Ghent– and we therefore briefly analyse these philosophers below in chronological order.

2. Henry of Ghent

Henry of Ghent (1217-1293) was probably the chief representative of the Philosophical Augustinianism which characterized the secular clergy of the University of Paris and which was so bitterly opposed to Aristotelian Scholasticism and Thomas Aquinas. He was one of the few secular magisters who was still present at the University of Paris when the mendicant Franciscans and Dominicans arrived there, and in 1277 Étienne Tempier thus named him a member of the theological commission in charge of investigating the orthodoxy of the new doctrines being taught at the school. Within a few weeks the commission came out with its judgment: 219 theses, many of which did not even represent the thought of their censured authors, were condemned.

Henry was the author of several *Quodlibeta* and a *Summa Theologica*. His metaphysics is clearly close to that of Avicenna: like him, he defines metaphysics as “the science of being in as much as being.” Being (*esse*) is what is first offered to the intellect; while it is thus impossible to define, everyone knows – according to Henry– what ‘that which is’ means. To the mind this ‘that which is’ is presented as a ‘thing’ (*res*) and as ‘necessary’ (*necesse*). The ‘thing’, or *res*, or essence is the ‘that which’, while the ‘necessary’ is that which necessarily is what it is. From here it follows that the first division of being is into necessary being and possible being. The possible has its cause in the necessary and in this way, through a series of relative necessities, one arrives to the First necessary. Hence the necessary is ‘something which is being (*esse*) itself,’ while the possible is ‘that which is something which may or may not be.’

It is obvious that God, uncreated being, is necessary being, while the creature is possible being. Metaphysics, the science of being in as much as being, is thus based on these two notions. Possible being, or in other words ‘something to which being can agree’, includes everything what falls into the categories. The proper (possible) being of the creature is its essence which is a divine idea and hence a participation in the divine essence; in as much as it belongs to the creature, however, it is not divine but has something that Henry calls ‘the

being of the essence' (*esse essentiae*). This is in fact the doctrine that characterizes Henry's thought, and which will continually reappear until it makes its appearance in Suárez: the identification of the being (*esse*) of a creature with its essence, and hence of the order of essence with the order of existence. This identification works to the disadvantage of the latter because, as the essentialist thesis of Avicenna had already shown, the order of existence necessarily tends towards accidentalization in such a system. And it is thus hardly surprising that Henry is forced to distinguish between the *esse essentiae* and the *esse existentiae* of the creature, with the first coming from the divine idea and the second from the free will of the Creator. But since the distinction between being and action in God is only one of reason, the difference between these two principles in the creature also reduces to one of only reason, a doctrine we will come across again in Suárez.

3. Duns Scotus

The most important work of Duns Scotus (1266-1308) is his *Commentary on the Sentences*, also called the *Ordinatio* or *Opus oxoniense*. Other works include the *Quaestiones in metaphysicam*, the *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, and the *De primo principio*, an outstanding fact given that he died at only 42.

The object of metaphysics according to Scotus is 'being in as much as being,' where this is opposed to any limitation or contraction of being (*esse*) to a specific mode. This being is completely abstract and indeterminate, a notion that—precisely because of its non-determination and abstraction—can be applied to everything that exists. In contrast to the Thomist notion of being as a fundamental and central act, Scotus understands being as a *natura communis* which is predicated univocally of all reality, from the creature to the Creator. In fact, it is this univocal nature which allows man to think about the different types of reality he encounters: finite and infinite, contingent and necessary, human and divine are simply the intrinsic modes of univocal being. This set-up already allows us to guess how Scotus approaches the problem of God: to arrive to the knowledge of a first principle which causes the sensible world one no longer needs to start from sensible reality but simply from being itself.

Being in as much as being has various properties. The first of these are the possible determinations, or 'modes,' which we have mentioned above, and which are always nothing less than being itself. In other words, while being may have different modifications, it is always intrinsically the same. The first and most fundamental modes are finite and infinite, a division that includes all further divisions of being and is anterior to the Aristotelean division into the ten

categories: while the categories are determinations and hence limitations of being, being itself nonetheless enters fully into the finite modality.

With regard to the constitution of material objects, Scotus asks whether *materia*, understood as a positive entity, actually exists on its own apart from the *forma*. His answer is affirmative: the composite would not be what it is if one of its constituent elements –its matter– did not have a positive reality or existence in itself. If matter is subject, it needs to be *something*. Scotus thus concludes that “matter possesses a certain reality outside of the intellect and its cause, in virtue of which it can receive only those substantial forms which are simply acts”⁸. It is thus clear that for Scotus matter has a certain being or existence in itself –even if only in a minimum way– and that this is what allows it to function as the subject of the act which the substantial form contributes to the composite. This being of the matter is distinct from that of the form however; it lacks all determination and qualification. Matter which is determinable, and form which is determination, are thus related realities whose union occurs through a “substantial link”⁹.

The fundamental reason why Scotus conceives of matter in this way is linked to his understanding of creation: if matter was truly created by God, it cannot not have a certain internal and intrinsic reality; Aristotle’s conception of matter as a pure potency completely actualized by the form was only due to his ignorance of the fact of creation. We thus see how Scotus’ theory is an attempt to adapt the Aristotelean concept of matter to the exigencies of Christian faith, and in particular to the notion of creation.

The consequences of this theory affect Scotus’ idea of how individuation takes place as well. For if matter is not truly prime matter because it already exists with its own act, then the form which actualizes it is not truly a substantial form either. The path for a series of progressive determinations through *formalitates* is thus opened up. The last of these *formalitates* is what Scotus calls the *haecceitas*: the definitive perfection of the substantial form, the definitive and last actualization of matter, the form, and the composite.

The differences between this vision and that of Thomas are already evident. Instead of the composition of prime matter and substantial form we have the composition of *natura comunis* and *haecceitas*. What about Scotus’ idea of the distinction between essence and existence? Without dedicating too much attention to this question, the solution of Scotus is clear: “an essence outside of its cause and which has no being through which it would be an essence is, in my

8 John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d.12 q.1 n.13.

9 John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d.12 q.1 n.3.

opinion, a contradiction”¹⁰. Essence therefore, if it is real and not just logical, if it is outside of its (creative) cause, must have its own being; and with this the distinction between essence and existence collapses. This is even clearer in the *Ordinatio*: “it is simply false that existence is different from essence”¹¹. Comparing the relationship between essence-existence to that of potency-operation leads to the same conclusion: “It is false to say that existence is related to essence as an operation is to potency because existence and essence are identical”¹². The solution of Scotus to the problem of the relation between essence and existence is thus that the latter is only a mode of the former; their distinction is modal, but there is no true composition between them. Existence is simply an intrinsic mode of essence¹³.

4. Synthesis

The principal ideas that Philosophical Augustinianism gave to Suárez were thus the following:

1. Essentialism, which gives ontological weight to essence rather than existence, and which Suárez learnt from Henry of Ghent and Scotus. This essence is understood as a divine idea which is ‘placed’ into existence outside of the divine creative essence when it has existence joined to it. It is this addition that determines the conditional and non-necessary character of the existence of the creature. Following these authors Suárez develops a concept of being that is highly abstract (as a *essentia realis*) whose first division is between finite and infinite (or contingent and necessary).
2. The first division in being as that between finite and infinite, an idea taken from Scotus. This division precedes the division of being into the ten categories, with these being reduced to the properties of only finite being, i.e. of the creature. This abstract imposition means that a study of reality cannot begin from physical nature but only from the metaphysical notion of creation; any ascent in metaphysics from creature to God is thus rejected in favour of a descending metaphysics of creation. The need for physical proofs for the existence of God based on movement thus disappears and we are left only with metaphysical proofs

10 John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d.12 q.1 n.16.

11 John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, IV, d.13 q.1 n.38.

12 John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d.16 q.1 n.10.

13 Cf. John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, I, d.8 nn.108-111.

based on causality. The Aristotelean '*quidquid movetur ab alio movetur*' is thus replaced with Suárez's '*omne quod fit ex aliquo fit*.'

3. The doubling of the order of essence and existence, taken from Henry of Ghent. This is of course a consequence of essentialism and leads to the accidentalization of existence.
4. The positive reality of matter, inherited from Scotus. This doctrine necessarily endangers the metaphysical unity of the composite, which is now the fruit only of a type of external amalgamation: either the 'link of union' of Scotus, or the 'mode of union' of Suárez.
5. That the distinction between essence and existence is only one of reason and not a real distinction, following Henry of Ghent and Scotus.
6. And finally Giles of Rome, in spite of his opposing theory on the real distinction between existence and essence, helped confirm Suárez in his essentialism through his idea of the 'realization' of essence through existence which is something added to it (*aliquid sibi additum*).

II. THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN SUÁREZ AND THOMAS

Our study has thus far highlighted the similarities between medieval Augustinianism and Suárez. Section II of this paper explores how these similarities led to important differences between Suárez and Thomas, a result hardly surprising given that Philosophical Augustinianism, as we have already pointed out, was in large measure a theological reaction to the Aristotelianism of which Thomas was a staunch defender. But this section also has a second goal: to demonstrate out how these 'points of friction' between Suárez and Thomas were to have a determining influence on the origin of modern philosophy, an idea largely unexplored in current academic research. The paradox is, in fact, that what is most characteristic of modern philosophy – its theory of matter and of knowledge – is actually very similar to ideas espoused by Augustinian and Franciscan philosophy in the late Middle Ages. This also explains why modern philosophy received such a stimulus from the doctrines of Ockham and his school, another system that has much in common with Suárez.

The most important 'points of friction' that we wish to analyse concern Suárez's doctrine on material substance and the distinction between essence and existence and act and potency. This chapter thus studies Suárez's understanding of the different levels of composition in material being: matter and form, substance and accident, essence and existence, and finally potency and act.

1. The problem of substantial composition: prime matter and substantial form¹⁴

1.1. The attribution of an 'act of being' to matter and its consequences: the substantialization of matter and the accidental union between matter and form

One area of great importance where the influence of Philosophical Augustinianism and its doctrine of universal hylemorphism on Suárez is evident is in his theory of the accidental union of matter and form and hence his rejection of the true unity of material substances. The basis for this position is his understanding of prime matter: he sees it as a type of subsistent *res* that then enters into relation with form. But a prime matter that is subsistent, and hence some type of substance, can only enter into an accidental union with form, which is thus now considered accidental to matter and material substance. In this way Suárez distances himself from Thomas and Aristotle for whom prime matter is not only potency (in as much as matter) but pure potency (in as much as prime), and hence devoid of any act. Instead he adopts a position much closer to that of Scotus for whom matter already has a proper act of being (*actus entitativus*), which while not being a formal act (*actus formalis*) is nonetheless sufficient to make it subsist as a thing (*res*). In this sense, it should be noted that the distinction between *actus entitativus* and *actus formalis* is wholly of scotistic origin.

Because of this Suárez no longer sees matter and form as metaphysical principles but as 'things' (*res*). He is in fact quite explicit on this point: "In consequence, matter is distinguished from form as one *thing* from another *thing*. This is certain; and since the composition of matter and form is *real* and *physical* [...], it follows that the composition is between *two things*"¹⁵. Form is thus no longer the metaphysical principle that confers being (*esse*) to prime matter; the latter already possess its own actuality even if, according to Suárez, its act of being is not sufficiently strong to allow it to exist naturally without the form¹⁶.

14 Cf. Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae* (DM), 13.

15 Francisco Suárez, DM, 13, 4, 5: "Distinguitur ergo materia a forma tamquam *res a re*. Et confirmatur; nam compositio substantiae ex materia et forma est *realis* et *physica* [...] ergo *ex duabus rebus*". The emphasis is ours.

16 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 15, 8-9.

1.2. The precarious union between matter and form occurs through what Suárez calls a “mode of substantial union”

It is clear that the union of two things that already exist (or two things that have their own *actus entitativus*) cannot produce a thing that is truly one. Suárez thus replaces the profound substantial union between Thomas’ metaphysical principles of matter and form with the idea of an accidental union between “two things” which enter into a physical composition. This composition is in fact more of an *aggregation* than a true unity, and it takes place through what Suárez can only call a mode (or type) of substantial union¹⁷. It is significative how Suárez understands this union by analogy: he claims that “matter and form are not a single being, but form a single being, just as many people are not a people but form a people”¹⁸. In fact, while admitting that matter has a “transcendental relation” towards form, Suárez nonetheless holds that it conserves its own being even in the composite. In such case the unity between matter and form can be reached only by means of a third ontological instance (the “mode of substantial union” that Suárez speaks about), because two things in act can never truly become one in act. It is thus more clear than ever that the union between matter and form, in spite of being called a ‘type of substantial union’ is actually an accidental one¹⁹.

1.3. From the extrinsic nature of the union between matter and form to the dualism of the Cartesian “res extensa”

The accidental nature of the union between matter and form implies that the two principles are actually extrinsic to each other. Composite material substance is thus divided into two halves extrinsically joined together: a purely material substance on the one hand and a purely formal substance on the other. The tendency toward dualism is thus strong in Suárez, particularly in the case of man where the union of matter and form (which is the spiritual soul) is between two substances whose natures are characterized by opposing attributes. In this way, Suárez opens the door to a new anthropological dualism which was almost immediately taken up and made more explicit by Descartes.

17 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 34, 4, 32.

18 Francisco Suárez, DM, 4, 3, 16.

19 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 4, 4, 19.

1.4. The immediate inherence of the accident of quantity in matter instead of in the composite: further approximations to the Cartesian “res extensa”

Having provided prime matter with a proper act of being and so approximating it to a substance, Suárez then insists that the accident of quantity inheres directly in matter: “Prime matter, in virtue of its being, is a sufficient material cause for the accidental forms that are proportionate to it; this is primarily and principally [the accident of] quantity, and through quantity all the rest [of the accidents]”²⁰. Or again, “matter is the proper and only subject in which quantity inheres”²¹ because “with its own being it is capable of partially subsisting by itself”²². This is of course a clear departure from Thomas for whom accidents inhere not in prime matter but in the composite of matter and form, i.e. in the material substance. But this doctrine of Suárez is also important for another reason: it shows how close he comes to Descartes’ notion of material substance as *res extensa*, i.e. as a ‘something’ that exists and whose essence consists in the attribute of spatial extension, or in other words of extension in length, breadth, and depth²³. Suárez’s subsisting prime matter with extension is clearly on the path towards the more articulated Cartesian position.

2. The problem of accidental composition: substance and accident²⁴

2.1. The weakening of substantial unity in material substances also leads to a rupture at the level of accidental composition: since the accident is also already an “ens”, it can only determine substance extrinsically

Since Suárez does not hold that the being of material substance proceeds from a single *actus essendi*, communicated to matter through form according to the principle *forma dat esse rei materiali*, and instead sees it as the aggregation of already subsisting matter and substantial form, it is hardly surprising that he also rejects the idea that accidents are ontologically ‘nourished’ by the one act of being of the substance. This is only logical: since the form does not transmit

20 Francisco Suárez, DM, 14, 3, 10.

21 Francisco Suárez, DM, 14, 3, 36: “Dico ergo [...] materiam esse posse et de facto aliquando esse proprium subiectum cui soli quantitas inhaeret”.

22 Francisco Suárez, DM, 14, 3, 57: “Ad primam enim iam saepe dictum est materiam habere suum esse proprium, quod, licet in genere substantiae sit incompletum, tamen comparatione accidentis est esse simpliciter ac per se subsistens partialiter”.

23 Cf. René Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae*, I, 53: “Et quidem ex quolibet attributo substantia cognoscitur; sed una tamen est cujusque substantiae praecipua proprietas, quae ipsius naturam essentiamque constituit, et ad quam aliae omnes referuntur. Nempe extensio in longum, latum et profundum, substantiae corporeae naturam constituit”.

24 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 14 and 32.

the act of being to matter, neither does the composite transmit being to accidents. In fact, the opposite is true: like matter, accidents too already have their own being, even if this is ‘smaller’ than that of the substance (Suárez calls the accident an *entitas diminuta*). But if accidents have their own being before union with substance, then like matter they already are substances, even if ‘smaller substances’. And the union between two substances (the accident and the composite) can only be extrinsic, with the two forming an aggregate.

This position is of course tempered by the admission that the proper being of an accident is so weak that it needs a subject to be sustained: “the accident requires a material cause [...] because its being is so diminished [*entitatem ita diminutam*] that it is not apt for subsistence and needs a subject to sustain it”²⁵. The fact remains, however, that if the accident has its own being, even if a weak one, then it truly is an *ens* in its own right, like matter it is a substance, even if in some sense an incomplete and imperfect one. And in as much as it is a substance it cannot inhere in another substance but can only be extrinsically added to it. Strictly speaking then, accidents cannot be said to inhere in substance but only to *adhere* to them.

2.2. The “mode of substantial union” is thus mirrored by a “mode of accidental union”

Suárez is thus obliged to postulate what he calls a “mode of accidental union” between substance and accident that attempts to bridge the gap between the two and save, in as much as possible, the precarious union between two *ens* which already subsist in virtue of their own act of being²⁶. We can see how radically different this system is to that of Thomas for whom the union between substance and accident is immediately guaranteed by a single *actus essendi* common to both. In short, just as the substantial nature of prime matter jeopardizes substantial union, so too does the substantial nature of the accident fragment the unity of substance at the second level of composition of material being, i.e. at the level of accidental composition.

25 Francisco Suárez, DM, 14, 1, 3: “At vero accidens ex praecisa et communi ratione accidentis postulat materialem causam, quia dicit *entitatem ita diminutam*, ut natura sua sit inepta ad subsistendum, ac proinde indigentem aliquo subiecto sustentante”. Cf. also DM, 14, 1, 8.

26 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 34, 4, 34.

2.3 *An accident which is extrinsic to substance does not manifest it but conceals it: towards a Kantian phenomenism*

It is clear that the ontological disintegration of substance that we have described has consequences in other areas of philosophy. Primary among these is in the theory of knowledge. For if, according to the logic of the ‘Copernican revolution’ (or of a philosophy of immanence in general), the accident (‘that which *is* in another’) is transformed into a mere phenomenon (‘that which *is manifested* of the other’), then it paradoxically follows that the path to knowledge of substance is not favoured but actually hindered and even closed off²⁷. This is hardly surprising: if the accident is already an *ens* from an ontological point of view, then it cannot provide knowledge of something other than itself. In this way access to the substance is blocked by precisely that element which was supposed to manifest it, i.e. the accident-phenomenon.

The result is that man has knowledge only of phenomena, of what is presented to his senses, which is something unintelligible and inconclusive, while the substance, or in other words the real, remains a mysterious and unknown *noumenon* to him. The phenomena reflect only themselves and are cognitively independent of a reality that has become fragmentary and unable to provide anything more than a distorted chimera of cognitive information about itself. This is of course the beginning and foundation of that theory of knowledge called phenomenism, a theory prepared by Locke and Hume and culminated in Kant, which profoundly marked the development of Western philosophy and the demise of metaphysics.

3. The problem of composition at the level of essence and existence²⁸

Suárez’s *Disputatio* XXXI, entitled “On the essence of finite being as such, on its existence, and on distinction between both,” contains 14 sections which can be divided into 4 parts:

- a. The first part (sections 1^a – 6^a) analyses the distinction between essence and existence, giving special attention to the question of essence;
- b. The second part (sections 7^a – 10^a) is dedicated to the study of existence, its causes, and its effects;

²⁷ This transformation occurs in a philosophy of consciousness, in which substance becomes the subject of consciousness and accident a moment of that consciousness. One can therefore say that what was classically expressed by the binomial accident-substance is thus transformed into the binomial phenomenon-consciousness.

²⁸ Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 31.

- c. The third part (sections 11^a – 13^a) studies the different types of existence, the separability of essence and existence, and their types of composition;
- d. And the fourth part (section 14^a) considers the relations of dependence on God in created being.

Our interest lies primarily in some ideas contained in this long section:

3.1. *Existence, or in other words, the state of actuality of essence*

Suárez begins by immediately identifying *esse* with “the actual existence of things”²⁹. In fact, “essence” does not express something real which possesses existence “outside its causes”, nor does it express an actuality by which essence is constituted outside its causes. “Actual existence” only signifies that a created thing is posited into existence from nothingness³⁰.

3.2. *Essence: the state of pure possibility, a “nothingness” which is nonetheless apt for creation*

If *esse* is actual existence, then what is essence since it has no positive character? “The essence of the creature, i.e. the creature itself before being produced by God, does not by itself possess any reality, and if we thus leave aside the being of existence [*esse existentiae*], essence is not a reality at all but is absolutely nothing”³¹. Nonetheless, at least according to Capriolo, the great commentator of Thomas, this “nothing” of pre-created essence has a “type of *aptitude* or *non-repugnance* with regard to being produced by God”³². It is precisely this *aptitude* that distinguishes *essentia realis* which is not yet created but creatable from what is fictitious and impossible. In this way Suárez equates real essence with possible essence, or simply the possible. And then he adds: “in this way this essence is called *real*, even before being produced, not because it contains a true actuality in itself but because it *can* become real by receiving from its cause [God] true being. This *possibility* only expresses, on the part of essence, a *non-repugnance to being produced*; on the part of the extrinsic cause, on the other hand, it signifies the power of production”³³. Before being created

29 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 1, 2.

30 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 1, 2.

31 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 2, 1: “Principio statuendum est essentiam creaturae, seu creaturam de se et priusquam a Deo fiat, nullum habere in se verum esse reale, et in hoc sensu, praeciso esse existentiae, essentiam non esse rem aliquam, sed omnino esse nihil”.

32 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 2, 2: “[...] ut ex parte creaturae dicat quamdam *aptitudinem*, seu potius *non repugnantiam*, ut in tali esse a Deo producatur”. The emphasis is ours.

33 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 2, 2: “Atque hoc etiam modo dicitur talis essentia, antequam fiat, realis, non propria ac vera realitate quam in se actu habeat, sed quia fieri potest realis, recipiendo veram entitatem a sua causa, *quae possibilitas* (ut statim latius dicam) *ex parte illius solum dicit non re-*

by God essence is thus an ontological “nothingness” which nonetheless can be created by Him. Suárez calls this “possible nothingness” an “objective potency”³⁴.

3.3. *An important Suárez’s principle: Being in act (existence) and being in potency (essence) are distinguished as being and non-being*

Before proceeding further, we should ask what the difference between being (*ens*) in act and being in potency is in the creature for Suárez. Since according to him being (*ens*) is synonymous for essence, this is equivalent to asking how essence in act and potency differ.

We have already seen that before being created essence is a “creatable nothingness” called “objective potency”. But Suárez then adds to this the idea that “in created things, being in potency and being in act are immediately and formally distinguished as *ens et non ens simpliciter*”³⁵. Hence the distinction between essence in potency and essence in act is actually a distinction of reason: “we are not speaking in fact of two realities but of a single reality, which is considered and compared by the intellect as if it were two”³⁶.

3.4. *Objective potency*

This “does not consist in a positive state or mode of being, and if one prescind from the power of the agent implies only negation, and concretely the negation of not yet being this type of potency”³⁷.

3.5. *What does essence in act (i.e. existence) add to essence in potency?*

One could say that essence in act adds existence to essence in potency. But this way of speaking would be equivocal for Suárez, because in reality all that is added is a difference of *reason*. This is because a real addition can only be made to a being that is already real; and since, as we have seen, essence is

pugnantiā ut fiat; ex parte vero extrinsecae causae dicit virtutem ad illam efficiendam”. The emphasis is ours.

34 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 2, 2: “Atque eodem modo et ratione, esse quod appellant essentiae, ante effectiōnem seu creationem divinam, solum est *esse potentiale obiectivum* (ut multi loquuntur, de quo statim), seu per denominationem extrinsecam a potentia Dei *et non repugnantiam ex parte essentiae creabilis*”. The emphasis is ours.

35 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 3, 1: “[...] in rebus creatis ens in potentia et in actu immediate ac formaliter distingui tamquam ens et non ens simpliciter”.

36 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 3, 1: “Quae distinctio [...] ab aliis vero vocatur distinctio rationis, quia non sunt duae res, sed una tantum, quae per intellectum concipitur et comparatur ac si essent duae”.

37 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 3, 4: “Relinquitur ergo ens in potentia ut sic non diceret tatum aut modum positivum entis, sed potius praeter denominationem a potentia agentis includere negationem, scilicet, quod nondum actu prodierit a tali potentia”.

potency is only a “nothingness,” its ‘properties’ cannot be real either, but only additions of reason³⁸.

3.6. What is existence? Existence is that by which a thing (i.e. essence) is formally constituted in act outside its causes

Up until now Suárez has spoken about being as essence. But he then asks about existence, i.e. that by which essence is constituted as actual. Existence is, in fact, that by which essence is posited outside its causes to become actualized, or in other words, that which allows essence to abandon its state of ontological nothingness and begin to be something. “Existence is that by which a thing is formally constituted in act outside its causes”³⁹, Suárez says, remembering of course that existence cannot be really distinguished from essence.

3.7. The distinction between essence and existence cannot be real

It is already clear that the distinction between essence and existence in Suárez cannot be real. “The created essence which is actually constituted outside its causes is not *really* distinguished from existence as if they were two realities or two distinct beings”⁴⁰. The distinction is only one of reason, just as the distinction between *ens* and nothingness is one of reason. In fact, as we have already seen, essence in potency and essence in act are related as *ens* and nothingness. “Being in potency is not really being at all, but nothing. It expresses on the part of the creatable things only non-repugnance or logical potency”⁴¹.

3.8. How does the intellect distinguish between essence and existence?

The intellect can distinguish between things which are not truly separated. It can also conceive of creatures in abstraction, without regard to their actual existence. This is because it is not contradictory to conceive of non-necessary nature without divine efficacy, and hence without actual existence. This means that “in a thing conceived of in this way, if we prescind from actuality, there is something which is considered to be totally intrinsic and necessary, something like a first constitutive of that thing, which offers itself as the object of that conception; this is what we call the essence of the thing, because without it the thing cannot be conceived. All the predicates which are said of this thing belong

38 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 3, 5.

39 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 4, 6: “Ergo huiusmodi esse quo res formaliter constituitur actu extra causas est existentia”.

40 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 6, 1: “Dicendum est enim primo essentiam creatam in actu extra causas constitutam non distingui *realiter* ab existentia, ita ut sint duae res seu entitates distinctae”.

41 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 6, 13: “Quod addo ut tollatur aequivocatio de entitate in potentia, quae revera non est entitas, sed nihil, et ex parte rei creabilis solum dicit non repugnantiam vel potentiam logicam”.

to it in an absolutely necessary and essential way, because it cannot exist or be conceived without them [...]. From the opposite point of view, we negate the actual existence or that actual being belongs to essence”⁴².

3.9. The distinction between essence and existence cannot be real because essence and existence are the same thing, but conceived of by the mind as two states (possible and actual)

In conclusion we can say that for Suárez essence and existence are actually the same reality, the only difference between them coming from how that reality is conceived. When seen as essence, the reality is called a *quidditas*, since essence is what defines or describes what the thing is and which particular grade or order of being it belongs to. In as much as existence, it is seen as something which exists in reality outside its causes. The foundation of this distinction between essence and existence is the fact that created beings do not have existence in themselves but could also not exist⁴³.

42 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 6, 15: “Ex hoc autem modo concipiendi nostro fit ut in re sic concepta, praescindendo ab actuali entitate, aliquid consideretur tamquam omnino intrinsecum et necessarium et quasi primum constitutivum illius rei quae tali conceptione obiiicitur; et hoc vocamus essentiam rei, quia sine illa nec concipi potest; et praedicata quae inde sumuntur, dicuntur ei omnino necessario et essentialiter convenire, quia sine illis neque esse neque concipi potest, quamvis in re non semper convenient, sed quando res existit. Atque ex opposita ratione, ipsum actu existere seu esse actualementem entitatem negamus esse de essentia, quia praescindi potest a praedicto conceptu, et de facto potest non convenire creaturae prout tali conceptui obiiicitur”.

43 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 6, 23: “Dicendum ergo est eandem rem esse essentiam et existentiam, concipi autem sub ratione essentiae, quatenus ratione eius constituitur res sub tali genere et specie. Est enim essentia, ut supra, disp. II, sect. 4, declaravimus, id quo primo aliquid constituitur intra latitudine mentis realis, ut distinguitur ab ente ficto, et in unoquoque particulari ente essentia eius dicitur id ratione cuius in tali gradu et ordine entium constituitur. Quomodo dixit Augustinus, XII de Civitate, c. 2: *Auctor essentiarum omnium aliis dedit esse amplius, aliis minus, atque ita naturas essentiarum gradibus ordinavit*. Atque hac ratione solet essentia *quidditatis* nomine significari, quia illa est quae per definitionem explicatur, vel aliqua descriptione, per quam declaramus quidnam res sit cuiusve naturae. At vero haec eadem res concipitur sub ratione existentiae, quatenus est ratio essendi in rerum natura et extra causas. Nam, quia essentia creaturae non hoc necessario habet ex vi sua ut sit actualis entitas, ideo, quando recipit entitatem suam, concipimus aliquid esse in ipsa quod sit formalis ratio essendi extra causas; et illud sub tali ratione appellamus existentiam quod, licet in re non sit aliud ab ipsamet entitate essentiae, sub diversa tamen ratione et descriptione a nobis concipitur, quod ad distinctionem rationis sufficit. Huius autem distinctionis fundamentum est, quod res creatae de se non habent esse et possunt interdum non esse. Ex hoc enim fit ut essentiam creaturae nos concipiamus ut indifferentem ad esse vel non esse actu, quae indifferentia non est per modum abstractionis negativae, sed praecisivae; et ideo, quamvis ratio essentiae absolute concipiatur a nobis etiam in ente in potentia, tamen multo magis intelligimus reperiri in ente in actu, licet in eo praescindamus totum id quod necessario et essentialiter ei convenit, ab ipsa actualitate essendi; et hoc modo concipimus essentiam sub ratione essentiae ut potentiam; existentiam vero ut actum eius. Hac ergo ratione dicimus hanc distinctionem rationis habere in re aliquod fundamentum, quod non est aliqua actualis distinctio quae in re intercedat, sed imperfectio creaturae, quae, hoc ipso quod ex se non habet esse et illud potest ab alio recipere, occasionem praebet huic nostrae conceptioni”.

3.10. Four other interesting ideas contained in this section

a) In XI, 22 Suárez asks whether existence is the last or the first actuality of *ens*. For some, including the author of the *Quaestio unica de anima*, a.6, ad 2, attributed to Thomas by Cajetan, existence is the last act and the last actuality of a thing. Other Thomists hold that it is the first act of a thing. Suárez attempts to answer this question by holding that the diversity of opinion is due to the different meanings of the word. This solution seems to be a weak one, however, for it fails to take into account Thomas' doctrine in the *Summa Theologiae* where *esse* is seen as the act of all acts of a thing. Thomas in fact affirms that "*esse* is what is most intimate and most penetrating in every thing"⁴⁴, and that "*being* is what is most perfect in every thing because it is compared to all the others as act and nothing is in act except in as much as it is. Hence *esse* is the actuality of all things and of all forms. It is not in fact compared to other things as receiver to received, but as received to receiver"⁴⁵.

b) In XI, 23 Suárez asks if accidents have true existence. According to him, "the most recent Thomists" hold that accidents do not have an existence that is distinct from that of the subject in which they inhere. According to them, he continues, "the being of the subject is sufficient to sustain the accidents with which they are really united. They then add that the accident is not so much an *ens* as a part of *ens*, according to Aristotle in Book VII of the *Metaphysics*, who says that the being of the accident consists in being-in and that it is not an *ens* and does not have being except in as much as participated in the being of the subject"⁴⁶. But Suárez, appealing to the authority of Scotus, rejects this opinion and affirms that "it is necessary to admit that accidental forms, in the same way that they have their own essence, also have their own existence. This was in fact the teaching of Scotus in In IV, dist. 12, q.1 [...]. Hence we must say that the accidental form has its own existence which it communicates to the subject when it informs it"⁴⁷. This only confirms our conclusions in the section on the accidental composition of substance when we said that accidents are beings in a proper, even if diminished and imperfect sense.

44 Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 8 a. 1: "Esse autem est illud quod est magis intimum cuilibet, et quod profundius omnibus inest".

45 Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 4 a. 1, ad 3: "Ad tertium dicendum quod ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium, comparatur enim ad omni aut actus. Nihil enim habet actualitatem, nisi in quantum est, unde ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum, et etiam ipsarum formarum. Unde non comparatur ad alia sicut recipiens ad receptum, sed magis sicut receptum ad recipiens".

46 Cf. Francisco Suárez, *DM*, 31, 11, 24.

47 Francisco Suárez, *DM*, 31, 11, 24-25.

c) The relation between essence and existence can only analogically be called a composition. “One must hold that the composition of essence and existence is called a composition “analogically” because it is not a real composition but only one of reason. In fact, real composition is only given between what is distinct in reality. But here the terms are not distinct in reality, as we have already seen. Hence their composition cannot be real”⁴⁸. Nonetheless, this composition is not a fiction of the intellect but has a foundation in reality. The foundation is that “the creature does not have actual existence per se, because it is only a potential *ens* that can receive being by participation from another, and hence the essence of a creature is conceived by us as something potential and existence as a mode or an act by which the essence is constituted as an *ens* in act. In this sense one understands how this composition belongs to the essence of created being, because it is proper of its essence to not have being per se but only to participate it from another”⁴⁹.

d) Is the state of essence or that of existence the more perfect one? After stating that this question only makes sense to those who admit the real distinction between essence and existence, Suárez makes it clear that in his opinion essence is the more perfect: “Once we admit that actual essence has a being that is proper and that is found intrinsically and formally outside nothingness, and not in virtue of existence itself [...], any foundation to holding that essence is less perfect than existence is destroyed”⁵⁰.

4. The problem of the composition of act and potency: predicamental and transcendental potency

Suárez begins the question on potency with a long *proemium*. We quote it extensively here because of the richness of ideas it contains:

48 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 13, 7: “At vero iuxta nostrum sententiam dicendum est compositionem ex esse et essentia analogice tantum compositionem appellari, quia non est compositio realis, sed rationis; compositio enim realis non est nisi ex extremis in re ipsa distinctis; hic autem extrema non sunt in re distincta, ut ostendimus; ergo compositio ex illis non potest esse realis”.

49 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 13, 9: “Hoc autem fundamentum non est aliud nisi quia creatura non habet ex se actu existere, sed tantum est ens potentiale quod ab alio potest esse participare; nam hinc fit ut essentia creaturae concipiatur a nobis ut potentiale quid, esse vero ut modus seu actus quo talis essentia ens in actu constituitur. Atque in hoc sensu optime intelligitur quomodo haec compositio sit de essentia entis creati, nam de essentia eius est non habere esse ex se, sed solum posse participare illud ab alio”.

50 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 13, 21-22.

“On the multiple meanings of potency. Aristotle dealt with this question in Book V, c. 12 of the *Metaphysics*, and then again more extensively in Book IX of the *Metaphysics*. In these texts his use of the word ‘potency’ is more general than the one we assume in this dispute; because as Thomas noted in the *Opusculo* 48, c. 3 of the *Qualit.*, potency can be understood in a *transcendental* or a *predicamental* way, i.e. in as much as a species of a determined predicate. With regard to the first mode we say that every being is divided into potency and act [...] as we have already seen in Disp. XXXI, section 2 and 3. There we explained what the term *objective potency* refers to, because this, if it is something, or being what it is, belongs to *transcendental potency* [...]. Besides this *transcendental potency* also refers to a *possible thing*, either with logical potency that is not repulsive, or with physical potency for the extrinsic determination taken from the potency of the agent or patient [...]. Finally *real potency*, whether active or passive, is attributed to any principle of action or passion; and in this way it is attributed to the substantial principle and to prime matter, in as much as it is matter that receives the form, and to the substantial form, in as much as principle of action, and to God himself in as much as omnipotent being [...]. We limit ourselves here to a more restricted sense of potency, i.e. that potency which is a type of quality”⁵¹.

4.1. *Predicamental Potency*

As outlined in the text above, Suárez holds that predicamental potency “belongs to the second species of quality.” In this sense, he continues, potency is the “proximate and connatural principle of the created agent to do something, and in this sense potency is always an accident”⁵². Predicamental potency “is said in reference to quality, because only qualities are proximate principles of action in the creature”⁵³. This potency is then further divided into active and passive.

Suárez also calls predicamental potency a “real potency.” This implies, however, that transcendental potency is not real. It is for this reason that objective potency, which is a logical and not real potency, cannot be included within predicamental potency. This is hardly surprising: as we have already seen, objective potency or transcendental potency consists in the non-real state of essence before its creation.

51 Francisco Suárez, DM, 43, *Proemium*.

52 Francisco Suárez, DM, 42, 3, 10.

53 Francisco Suárez, DM, 42, 3, 10.

Finally, Suárez distinguishes between an active and a passive potency within predicamental potency⁵⁴. The two are distinguished by the act that emanates from them: active potency corresponds to operation or secondary acts which arise from the potency but pass on to another subject; passive potency corresponds to the first act which remains within the same potency. “It is thus necessary to affirm that every real and predicamental potency is either active or passive, and that this division is sufficient [...]. In fact potency, in as much as potency, is a type of first act [*quidam actus primus*] which affirms relation to the second”⁵⁵.

This last affirmation is an important one. Predicamental potency, whether active or passive, is for Suárez a “type of act” (*quidam actus*). Real potency is thus reduced to act precisely in order to save its reality, except that strictly speaking this reality does not belong to it as potency but as act. The true potential nature of potency is thus overturned with the formula *potentia ut sic est quidam actus*, and because of this real potency as such disappears. But this is hardly surprising; as we have already seen, “in created things, being in potency and being in act are immediately and formally distinguished as *ens et non ens simpliciter*”⁵⁶. Hence both predicamental (or real) and transcendental (or objective) potency are not truly potencies: the first because it is an act, the second because it is a nothingness.

But without any true potency, Suárez is forced to move towards a position where act is limited only by itself. He rejects as false, in fact, that the idea that “a being not received in something cannot be limited, because there is no receptive potency or difference to contract it,” because “act is limited and finite in itself and in virtue of its own being, and it has no need of something really distinct from it to limit or contract it; rather it is in virtue of its own formal being that it is intrinsically determined through its own nature and that determined magnitude of perfection that it has, while it is extrinsically limited by God both as efficient and exemplar cause”⁵⁷.

Act is thus not limited through a potency that receives it. And Suárez then applies this nominalistic principle to the distinction between essence and existence: “Since existence is nothing other than essence in act, then just as actual essence is formally limited by itself or by its intrinsic principles, so too is created existence limited by means of the essence itself, not because this is the

54 Cf. Francisco Suárez, DM, 43, 3, 2.

55 Francisco Suárez, DM, 43, 1, 6.

56 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 3, 1.

57 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 13, 18.

potency in which existence is received but because existence is nothing other than the very same actual essence”⁵⁸.

Suárez is thus convinced, like Scotus before him, that finite act is finite in itself and that infinite act is infinite in itself. The Thomist idea that potency limits act is thus replaced with the doctrine of the intrinsic limitation of act. And in fact for Suárez potency is not truly potency but act. The followers of Suárez were thus always resolutely opposed to the Thomist idea of the unicity and infinite nature of pure act⁵⁹.

“Real potency” is therefore a strange and even erroneous term for Suárez. For the factor that makes it real, its conversion into act, is at the same time that which does not truly allow it to be a potency. At the predicamental level of potency therefore, there is no true distinction between potency and act, but rather an assimilation of the former to the latter. The relation between potency and act is thus replaced between the relation between first and second act. True potency has thus disappeared even if it has an orientation to a more perfect act. Like Scotus, Descartes, and so many others, Suárez has completely misunderstood the nature of the act-potency composition because he conceives of potency as a reality that already has its own act. But this idea seriously risks the unity of composed being. Rather than composition we have a conversion or assimilation of potency to first act and then its relation to second act. It is this idea of potency as act which is the true foundation of the theories we have already seen above, for example the idea that prime matter already has its own actuality.

4.2. Transcendental Potency

According to Suárez, the distinction between “predicamental potency” and “transcendental potency” is the same as that between “real potency” and “unreal potency.” He thus also calls transcendental potency “logical potency” or “objective potency.”

In Chapter 9 of the *Index locupletissimus*, where Suárez proposes his division between being in act and potency, he says that the division is not one “between beings that are essentially distinct, but between different *states* of the same being because of its existence”⁶⁰. *Disputatio XXXI* presents the same

58 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 13, 18: “Unde cum existentia nihil aliud sit quam essentia in actu constituta, sicut essentia actualis per seipsam vel per sua intrinseca principia est formaliter limitata, ita etiam existentia creata limitationem habet ex ipsa essentia, non ut est potentia in qua recipitur, sed quia in re nihil aliud est quam ipsamet actualis essentia”.

59 Cf. Paul B. Grenet, *Ontología* (Barcelona: Herder, 1985), 52.

60 Francisco Suárez, DM, *Index Locupletissimus*, IX, *proemium*: “[...] dividere ens in ens in potentia vel in actu [...] non est divisio in entia essentialiter diversa, sed in diversos *status* ejusdem entis secundum rationem existendi”. The emphasis is ours.

argument: “In creatures being in potency and being in act are distinguished immediately and formally as *ens* and *non-ens simpliciter*. Some call this a negative distinction because one of the terms is true while the other is not; others call the distinction one of reason because they are not two realities but only one reality which the intellect conceives of and compares as if they were two”⁶¹. The relation between being in potency and being in act is thus the same as that which exists between a negative and positive state, keeping in mind however that only the positive state, i.e. being in as much as in act, is real.

For Suárez potency and act are therefore not two metaphysical principles that are really distinct and which *ens* is composed of. Potency, or being in potency (*essentia possibilis*), and act, or being in act (*essentia actualis*) are not two principles but the same reality conceived of by the intellect as two states of the same *ens*.

In *Disputatio* XLIII, while speaking of “objective potency,” Suárez writes: “[objective potency], if it is something, or being what it may be, belongs to *transcendental potency*”⁶². A little further on in the *Proemium* he says that objective potency is not a type of predicamental potency because transcendental potency “is a determined species of quality”⁶³. He also claims that objective potency is “an almost negative potency which consists in a non-repugnance towards *esse*. This is why it is called a *logical possible*, because it has *logical potency*”. The potency is called logical “because it does not consist in a real faculty, but in the non-repugnance of the terms which are considered in the order of composition and division of the mind as proper of logic”⁶⁴.

For Suárez, therefore, “transcendental potency,” “logical potency,” and “objective potency” are synonyms. Nonetheless, the term “transcendental potency” emphasises the capacity that an *ens* which does not yet exist has to begin to exist. “Objective potency,” on the other hand, emphasises the ideal content of that *ens* which, even though it does not exist, is realizable. And “logical potency” underlines the ideal character of this “object” of reason.

In *Disputatio* XIV, which discusses whether “act and potency are in the same genus,” Suárez is forced to explain and defend Scotus’ opinion on “objective potency” (*quid obiectiva potentia apud Scotum*). He says that what Scotus means by “objective potency” is the same as what he calls “being [*ens*] in potency,” and that what Scotus meant by the term “was not a true reality that

61 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 3, 1.

62 Francisco Suárez, DM, 43, *Proemium*.

63 Francisco Suárez, DM, 43, 1, 2.

64 Francisco Suárez, DM, 42, 3, 9.

actually exists in nature, which is only real active or passive potency [...], but a reality in the state of possibility before existing in act, in the way that we say that something is in potency before existing [...].” In this sense, Suárez continues, “he [Scotus] affirms that this potency and its act are of the same genus; and one can even affirm that they are negatively the same reality [...] because they are not two realities but the same one conceived of as being in different states”⁶⁵.

It is thus clear that “objective potency” is not, according to Suárez, a metaphysical principle but simply a *state* or *mode* of being.

“Being in objective potency is *simpliciter nihil*, or *non-ens* in act”⁶⁶. Objective potency is thus assimilated into nothingness, in conformity with the already stated Suarezian principle that the distinction between being in potency and being in act is like that between *ens* and *non-ens simpliciter*.

In this way, even when considered transcendently, potency in as much as potency disappears. If at the predicamental level potency was defined as a type of act (*quidam actus*), at the transcendental level it is defined as *non-ens simpliciter*, as nothingness. Potency is thus no longer a metaphysical medium between being (act) and non-being (nothingness), but is assimilated into one of the two extremes: into act in as much as predicamental potency, and into nothingness in the case of transcendental potency. There is no middle term here: we either have act or nothingness. Nonetheless, this nothingness is not a simple being of reason; while remaining nothing it is a possibility in the area of real essence and thus has a certain title to existence. This fitness towards existence, this *aptitudo ad existendum* (in words of Suárez, which later will say Leibniz) is what distinguishes beings of reason and beings in potency (predicamental potency) which thus enter, in some way, in the order of the real.

65 Francisco Suárez, DM, 14, 2, 13: “Nam ille [Scotus] non intelligit per *potentiam obiectivam* aliquam veram rem quae sit actu in rerum natura, quo sensu sola potentia activa vel passiva est potentia realis [...] sed per *potentiam obiectivam* intelligit Scotus rem in statu possibili antequam actu sit, quomodo dicimus rem esse in potentia antequam sit [...]. Atque ita dicit hanc potentiam et actum esse eiusdem generis, quia res possibilis et res in actu eiusdem generis sunt; immo dicere etiam posset esse eandem rem negative (ut aiunt), quia *non sunt duae res, sed eadem in diversis statibus concepta*”. The emphasis is ours.

66 Francisco Suárez, DM, 31, 3, 6: “Quia ens in potentia obiectiva, ut ostendimus, est simpliciter nihil seu non ens actu”.

III. CONCLUSIONS

1. The disappearance of potency in Suárez

The notion of potency in Suárez is divided into two senses, even if none of them can actually be considered a potency: predicamental potency which is identified with act, and objective or transcendental potency which is at the purely logical and hence intentional level. Potency as a medium between act and nothingness is thus missing in Suárez and this sets him apart from Plato (*me-on* in the relative sense), Aristotle (*dynamis*) and Thomas (*potentia*). Thomas in fact states quite clearly that “being in potency is almost a medium between pure non-being and being in act”⁶⁷.

2. The actualism of Suárez

The disappearance of potency in the philosophy of Suárez can also be called *actualism*. This *actualism*, which was to become a defining characteristic of rationalism, brings back memories of Parmenides. In fact the rigid nature of Suárezian *esse*, which is found only in the complete and perfect being that is act, puts the world what we know from experience at risk: the world in which *nature* is the principle of movement precisely because it is incomplete and potential and tends towards the perfection that is its end. The philosophy of Suárez thus disregards the instability that characterizes everything that is not the absolute principle, Pure Act, God.

3. Is Suárez a rationalist?

Why does Suárez take the path toward *actualism*? One possible reason is the excessive importance he gives to his theory of knowledge, a characteristic common to many authors of the end of the Middle Ages and of the so-called *second Scholasticism*. For that part of *ens* which is in a special relation to the intellect is *essence*, and that which is intelligible is so because it is in *act*. *Actual essence* is thus the principle of intelligibility of the real. And it is thus hardly surprising that that a philosophy which is dominated by the desire for *intelligibility* falls into the temptation of forgetting that other aspect of being which is real but in ‘darkness’, i.e. potency. There is, in other words, a logical connection between actualism and rationalism.

67 Thomas Aquinas, In *I Phys.*, lc. 9 n. 60: “Ens autem in potentia est quasi medium inter purum non ens et ens in actu”.

In as much as the essence is the determined mode of *ens* which is expressed in its definition, it is in a unique relation with the intellect. Now the intellect always grasps being within a certain form; a direct apprehension of being is impossible for the intellect because of its excess of actuality. Even potency, at least in the system of Thomas, is not directly intelligible (this time because of a lack of actuality), and cannot be grasped except in relation to the corresponding act or form. Suárez needed in other words an object for the intellect, an object that was neither too dense nor too light for it. It could not be too dense, and following the footsteps of an Avicennian Platonism Suárez thus reduces being to actual essence. But neither could it be too light, and for this reason the cumbersome notion of potency had to be expelled from the kingdom of clear and determined essence. The object of the intellect thus becomes the *actuality* of essence.

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