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Suárez, now better known

Suárez: Between Scholasticism and Modernity. By José Pereira. Milwaukee WI: Marquette University Press, 2007. Pp. 384. \$37.00 paper. ISBN 978-087462-750-3

In this bold and fascinating study, José Pereira describes the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) as a pivotal point in the history of philosophy, which means two things: First of all, he is the „consummator of Scholasticism“ (10), mainly through his „systematization of metaphysics“ (13) and through his creation of a „super-system“ — a synthesis of philosophy and theology „with the former being made the foundation for the latter“ (16). Second of all, he is the „founder of modern philosophy“, mainly because of one small word: *notior*, or „better known“.

Suárez, when addressing the problem of the unity of the concept of being at the beginning of the *Disputationes Metaphysicae* (*DM*), recurs to the traditional distinction between formal concept, or *conceptus formalis* (the act of understanding), and objective concept, or *conceptus obiectivus* (that which is understood through the formal concept). To decide whether there is one concept of being, he argues that we should first look at the „subjective“, the formal concept, „because it was better known (*notior*) to us than the objective, especially as the subjective is produced by us and in us“ (*a nobis et in nobis*)“ (27).

P. now suggests that this line of argumentation is the seminal thought from which all the subsequent idealistic systems — systems which no longer share the naïve realism of the Scholastics or their epistemological optimism of a conformity between our thoughts and the things outside — emerge through a more or less violent process called „anamorphosis“ (126). Some violence is necessary, because Suárez himself is definitely a realist. P. says this explicitly (136), but he does not point out the passage where Suárez clarifies that the priority of the formal concept concerns only its being better known, whereas its unity continues to depend on the unity of the object (*DM* 2, s. 1, n. 9).

As to the importance of the formal concept in Suárez’s system, we can only confirm P.’s findings. Suárez’s theory of art production as developed in *DM* 25 (*De causa exemplari*) even seems to break with the basic premise of intentionality, i.e. that a thought is defined by its object or that thinking is always thinking of something. According to Suárez, the starting point in art is not an objective concept, i.e. some idea or preconception of the thing to be produced, but the formal concept, i.e. the act of representation or the act of focussing. This act of representation is now productive in that it has the piece of art emerge as its own fulfillment (*ut ... repraesentationem expleat* — *DM* 25, s. 1, n. 41). Suárez even endows man with the faculty of virtual reflection by which each act of thought knows about its own tendency towards the object,

allowing the artist to control the process of production by controlling this tendency (*DM* 25, s. 1, n. 39).

Even in Suárez's theory of truth — and this again confirms P.'s point — the role of the formal concept is pre-eminent. When Hervaeus Natalis and Durandus de Sancto Porciano say that truth is „a conformity between the thing according to objective being and the thing according to real being“, Suárez replies that they are explaining with the objective concept what he himself would explain with the formal concept (*DM* 8, s. 7, n. 25). The reason is that Suárez, in the case of perfect cognition, drops any intermediary between formal concept and thing outside, thus making the objective concept identical with the thing outside (*DM* 25, s. 1, n. 29). The formal concept simply refers the mind to the things outside (*DM* 25, s. 1, n. 37).

The only weak point here may be that P. does not make clear enough the radical consequences of Suárez's step. P. focuses on the concept of being, which, as a universal concept or general notion, signifies confusedly (110). Thus, the concept is not identical with some thing outside, but rather acts as an intermediary. P. even coins the term „omniconceptualism“ to stress that, for Suárez, we know everything through concepts, whereas Descartes — in an act of anamorphosis — says that we know nothing but concepts (30). But what is the significance of this contrast if for Suárez, the concept is in many cases (i.e. in the case of perfect or adequate cognition) absolutely identical with the thing outside?

Admittedly, there is an ambiguity to Suárez's objective concept. But this ambiguity is of a different character than P. describes it: P. says: In general, there is a thing behind the concept. Only in some cases, like privations, negations and rational relations, there is no thing. But Suárez says: In the case of perfect cognition, there is no thing behind the concept, because the thing is the concept (by extrinsic denomination from the formal concept). In other cases, like in the case of general notions, there is a thing or there are things behind the concept (*DM* 2, s. 1, n. 1).

One passage sums up what we would consider P.'s misunderstanding: Suárez says that the objective concept is sometimes a singular and individual thing, but P. says that, for Suárez, „the objective concept is primarily *about* [my italics] things which have reality independently of the mind“ (30).

As to the impact of Suárez's philosophy, we find many interesting aspects in P.'s interpretation, but there are some important points where we would like to disagree. P. claims that „through the formula *Cogito ergo sum*, Descartes indicated how a knowledge of an indubitable extra-mental reality (*sum*) was made dependent (*ergo*) on an indubitable intra-mental consciousness (*Cogito*)“ (31).

But Descartes never has this formula. He just says: *ego sum, ego existo, certum est. Quamdiu autem? nempe quamdiu cogito* (*Meditationes* 2, 6). My thinking assures me of my existence only for that specific moment. I do not experience within myself a force that might preserve my existence beyond that moment (*Meditationes* 3, 32). So there has to be a being that causes and preserves all other beings' being, and that being, God, will have established an order such that my ideas, for most of the time, accurately reflect the situation outside. — These are the steps Descartes takes to find the foundation of human certainty: God's veraciousness. So Descartes' *ego cogito* is embedded in a quite traditional environment and is far away from being a fundament of truth. Descartes is not the idealist as which P. labels him (30), and by re-introducing, in a Scotist fashion, the thing in objective being as an intermediary between the act of thought and outer reality, he is in a sense even more traditional than Suárez.

In general, it seems to us that the systems before the middle of the 18th century are much more similar to Suárez's system than described by P., and Descartes is just one example for that. Because starting from Suárez's perfect balance between the act of thought and outer reality, you can put some more weight on one side or the other, but the framework — the science of metaphysics with its broad perspective — remains intact.

But then, in the middle of the 18th century, there is a disruption from which philosophy has to date not yet fully recovered. Hegel, observing the fallout of this disruption, writes in 1812 (*Science of Logic*, Preface to the First Edition) that „the exoteric teaching of the Kantian philosophy — that the understanding ought not to go beyond experience, else the cognitive faculty will become a theoretical reason which itself generates nothing but fantasies of the brain —“ has ultimately left „a cultured nation without metaphysics — like a temple richly ornamented in other respects but without a holy of holies.“ And together with metaphysics, any science that does not always keep in mind the supposed role of the observer has become impossible. The result is a variety of systems swinging between rationalism (where the limitations of the observer are emphasized) and illuminism (where the observer is really the source of his own knowledge). It is hard to compare these systems with Suárez's, or to assume that they contain important elements of Suárez's thought or that they are standing on one systematic plane with Suárez's. Maybe P.'s intention to describe Suárez's systematic impact on all the great modern philosophers makes him a little bit too optimistic with respect to these problems. On the other hand, this optimism has led P. to a seminal study which will for long inspire the discussion on the relationship between premodern Scholasticism and Modernity.