Suárez on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Universals

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Introduction

Suárez elaborates his theory of universals in the sixth Disputation “On Formal and Universal Unity” of his two-volume Disputationes metaphysicae (hereafter DM). DM 6 constitutes, in order, the second disputation, in which the Jesuit examines various kinds of transcendental unity. The first treatment, i.e., that contained in DM 5 (“Individual Unity and Its Principle”), is concerned with the question of individual unity, which, in comparison with the two other kinds of unity, is considered ontologically privileged. Despite its main focus on the metaphysical aspect of the problem, the psychological and, marginally, the logical facets of the issue are taken into account as well. Contrary to Duns Scotus, whose treatment methodologically determines Suárez’s approach in DM 6, the
Spanish Jesuit comes to universals only after treating the convoluted issue of individual unity. The inversion of Scotus’s procedure (apparent in *Ordinatio* 2.3.1), given by the existence of common nature as the evident point of departure, clearly foreshadows the opposite setting and ‘tuning’ of Suárez’s theory.

Within the context of Suárez’s Disputation, I shall focus on its metaphysico-epistemological core, which corresponds to what in the logical treatises of Suárez’s era is more or less presented under the titles “*De universale in communi*” or “*De universale secundum se*.” This core is located in the first six sections, and also partially in the seventh and eighth sections, of the *DM* 6. Focused on the central metaphysical problem of the ontological foundation of our universal concepts and their psychogenesis, and on the ontological evaluation of various types of universals and intentions, the following issues shall be set aside: the quality and sufficiency of the division of the logical universal into five predicables;7 the nature of the distinction between the higher metaphysical grades (e.g., animality and rationality);8 the issue of the actual predication of the so-called metaphysical abstracts (‘humanity is animality’);9 and the problem of the physical foundations of logical intentions, i.e., from which hylomorphic principles the genus and difference are derived.10

Suárez’s terminology is traditionally scholastic. Individual unity, the property of being a singular entity, is defined by means of the incommunicability and indivisibility of many instances of the same kind as the original (divided) entity. Universal unity, by contrast, is characterized by communicability and divisibility into individuals of the same kind as the divided entity. Following Porphyry, Suárez maintains that universals are not communicable in parts, in the way that a cake can be shared by the members of a family. Nor is it shared successively, as a used car is shared by all its temporary owners. Universal unity, rather, is the unity that is communicable to all its instances as a whole at the same time.11 By using the term ‘communicability’, Suárez explicitly endorses Aristotle’s definition of the universal as capable of being in many and also predicable of many.12 Suárez embraces the commonplace typology of universals, namely, universal in causation (*universale in causando*), universal in signification or representation (in significando or repraesentando), universal

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12 Predicability is taken by Suárez as the property of the aptitude to be in many. See *DM* 6.8.2 (ed. Vivès, vol. 25, p. 232).