CHAPTER 12

Original Features of Suárez’s Thought

José Pereira

1 Introduction

Originality is not the first word that comes to mind for many scholars seeking to describe the achievement of the Doctor eximius. Such, for example, was the case with one of his illustrious fellow Jesuits, Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the greatest poets of the Victorian era. In a letter to his friend Richard Dixon, Hopkins declared that “Suárez is our most famous theologian: he is a man of vast volume of mind, but without originality or brilliancy; he treats everything satisfactorily, but you never remember a phrase of his, the manner is nothing.”

But this opinion is by no means the common view of the Extraordinary or Uncommon (eximius) Doctor. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), inaugurator of the modern philosophy of history, extols Suárez’s brilliancy and eloquence, asserting that the Doctor “in his Metaphysics discussed everything that could be known in philosophy in a distinguished manner as becomes a metaphysician, and in an extremely clear and easy style, as in fact he stands out by his incomparable eloquence.” Likewise, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), prominent contributor to the development of international law, was in awe with the acuity of the Doctor’s thinking, contending that Suárez was a man “of such subtlety in philosophy, that he has seldom any equal.”

1 The only work of Suárez quoted in this essay is his DM, disputation, section, number (Vivès edition 1866, volume, page). Thus DM 7.2.3 = disputation 7: section 2: number 3. I was greatly assisted in understanding Suárez’s complex thought by reading José Hellin, s.j., La analogia del ser y el conocimiento de Dios en Suárez (Madrid, 1947).


3 Giambattista Vico, Autobiografia, ed. Mario Furbini, Einaudi Editore (1960), p. 7: “...ragionava di tutto lo scibile in filosofia in una maniera eminente, come a metafisico si conviene, e con uno stile sommamente chiaro e facile, come infatti egli vi spicca con una incomparabil facdonia.”

(1679–1754), rationalist thinker of the German Enlightenment who was thought by Kant to be the “greatest of all dogmatic philosophers,” Suárez was evidently considered the greatest of the scholastic philosophers, for “among the Scholastics [he] appears to have meditated the objects of metaphysics more profoundly.”

2  

Systematization of Metaphysics

But did the Uncommon Doctor accomplish any actual achievement that would justify these plaudits? Martin Heidegger, one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, thought that he did, observing the following:

It is Suarez who for the first time systematized medieval philosophy and above all ontology. Before him the Middle Ages, including Thomas and Duns Scotus, treated ancient thought only in commentaries.... The basic book of antiquity, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, is not a coherent work, being without systematic structure. Suarez...tried to make up for this lack...by putting the ontological problems in a systematic form for the first time, a form which determined a classification of metaphysics that lasted through the subsequent centuries down to Hegel.

Was the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle not a ‘coherent work,’ lacking in method? Speaking of this work, Suárez (who believed so) claimed:

Aristotle proposes various questions in Chapter 1, while in other Chapters he brings out reasons for doubting on both sides, but resolves nothing. Moreover, in proposing these questions he observes almost no method nor any certain order, but he seems to have poured them out as they came to his mind.

Suárez, on the other hand, was uncompromising on method, declaring:

---

