

# THE HIDDEN INFLUENCE OF SUÁREZ ON KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL CONCEPTION OF 'BEING', 'ESSENCE' AND 'EXISTENCE'

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## ABSTRACT

Critical philosophy has been presented by Kant as an overcoming of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Schulmetaphysik's schemes; yet, it is also true that the metaphysics of the "Schools" has provided Kant with the essential framework of transcendental philosophy. In these perspectives the Kantian change can be seen as a profound rethinking of the meaning and function of some basic notions of modern ontology, starting from the Jesuit scholasticism and especially from the *Disputationes metaphysicae* of Suárez: "ens" and "essentia", "possibilis" and "realis", "objectum" and "causa", "efficiens" and "transcendens". Such notions are reinterpreted by Kant in order to form the new structures of critical metaphysics, but at the same time they keep the essential core of their original meaning: in fact, within the Kantian system they explicitly realize their meaning.

## 1. A FUNDAMENTAL DECISION ABOUT BEING

The aim of this paper is quite simple, "rudimentary" one might even say: I would like to reread some well-known texts by Kant in an attempt to demonstrate that in them some fundamental concepts of Suárez's metaphysics are at work. This is naturally not a matter either of presenting Suárez as a precursor of Kant nor of considering Kant as an effect of Suárez. I shall instead attempt to focus on, in the "long distance" relation between the two authors, one of the fundamental *decisions* in the history of modern Metaphysics.

I use the term "decision" deliberately, in order to indicate a mental attitude common to both thinkers, who, albeit in widely differing contexts, shared the same basic choice: to determine the meaning of existence on the basis of its ontological difference from a thing or an actual being. Existence is not a thing, but the *mode of being* of a thing. Herein arise the ambivalence and the aporetic character of this decision, since it can be understood in two different ways.

In Suárez, existence, in the sense of actuality, is different from essence, taken as mere possibility, just as the *actus essendi* differs from the fact that we can think of a thing as non-contradictory in a logical sense; that is, we can think of the necessary

connexion between predicates and the qualities that inhere in a thing. But if we wanted to determine in a specific way the nature or sense of existence (*ratio existentiae*) as different from essence, for Suárez – and later for Kant too – we would find ourselves faced with an impossible task. Indeed, at least for us mortals, existence is never pure or absolute, but is always the existence of *something*, hence, of an essence.

In other words, existence only “says” the fact that a thing – as it is, in itself – is or is not. Hence, the difference between existence and essence (the fact that the former is *not* a thing, while the latter is) leads back almost inevitably to identity; that is, to essence (even though, for Suárez, the term essence indicates the ontological determination of a being, while for Kant it is only the empirical and categorical determination of a phenomenon).

Precisely because being is not one *res* amongst others, we can never think of it in “real” terms, except by starting from what exists. In other words, the *datum* of existence tends to be identified with *what exists*; more precisely, with the fact that something is produced by a cause (Suárez) or in the fact that something is part of our category of causality (Kant).

The first thing to consider is that, in both Suárez and Kant, this decision concerning the sense of “existing” is made to safeguard the *surplus of being*, the *mystery of provenance* and the *fact of existing* as different from what we think *a priori* by way of concepts alone. Existence is not at our disposal, so to speak. In both cases “existence” is a coming-out or an exit: from causes for the Catholic theologian, who knows, through his faith, the order of Creation, and from concepts for the rationalist philosopher. Yet in both cases the price to pay is high. Let’s now look at the question in more detail.

## 2. SUÁREZ: FROM THE CATHOLIC TO THE REFORMED CONTEXT

It is well known that the name of Suárez reached the 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosophical context through the teaching of Metaphysics in the reformed universities, where the *Disputationes metaphysicae* quickly became a reference manual. Suffice it to mention the Calvinist, Clemens Timpler, in the early decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who taught at Steinfurt Gymnasium and who took up in a grand manner the metaphysics of the Jesuits Fonseca, Perera and Suárez in his *Metaphysicae systema methodicum* (1604); or Rudolph Göckel (Goclenius), who quotes Suárez, especially in his *Conciliator philosophicus* (1609) and, on the theme of *possibilitas*, in his *Lexicon philosophicum* (1613).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. Timpler, *Metaphysicae systema methodicum* (Steinfurti: Caesar, 1604); R. Goclenius, *Conciliator Philosophicus* (Casselis: Ex officina typographica Mauritiana, opera Wilhelmi Wesseli, 1609); R. Goclenius, “Possibilitas, möglich”, in *Lexicon philosophicum quo tanquam clave philosophiae fores aperiuntur* (Francofurti: Typis viduae Matthiae Beckeri, impensis Petri Musculi & Ruperi Pistorij, 1613), 833 sqq.

Shortly after, Suárez was to become part of a Lutheran context, with two important writers: Henning Arnisaeus, working at the University of Frankfurt am Oder and author of *De constitutione et partibus Metaphysicae* (1606), and Jakob Martini, working at the University of Wittenberg and author of a work entitled *Metaphysicae Exercitationes* (1608).<sup>2</sup> In both these texts Suárez's *Disputationes* constitute an important reference. After the research carried out by Lewalter, Leinsle and Courtine (to name but a few) the historical frame of reference is now clear and there is no need for me to examine it in detail here.<sup>3</sup>

But how can we explain the paradox that one of the most important theologians in the Roman Catholic world, a Spanish Jesuit, became an authority in the teaching of German, Protestant metaphysics? With the fact, naturally, that the *Disputationes* is the first manual of "metaphysics" that does not appear together with a commentary on Aristotle, but instead uses his opus as a source, or as a series of materials, for a new discipline and in view of possible new syntheses.

Another fact, too, must be taken in account: the metaphysical discourse elaborated by Suárez is a tool for theology; that is, it provides the basis for a discourse on supernatural revelation. The way in which Suárez founds and develops metaphysics in a "ministerial" sense ([*prima philosophia*] *sacrae ac supernaturali theologiae praecipue ministrat*)<sup>4</sup> is represented by his choice to consider it in a rigorously "neutral" way as distinct from theology. Obviously this does not mean that a "natural" discourse can leave aside any discourse on God as the creator of all beings. Nevertheless, the latter is not thematized as such at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* – that is, prior to the

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<sup>2</sup> Henning Arnisaeus, *De constitutione et partibus Metaphysicae, tractatus in quo pleraque ad hanc materiam pertinentia discutiuntur* (Francofurti ad Oderam: Impensis Iohannis Thimen Bibliopolae, 1606); see also Henning Arnisaeus, *Epitome metaphysices, In qua fundamenta Aristotelica ordine scientifico explicantur*, Francofurti ad Moenum: Sigism. Latomus, 1606); Jakob Martini, *Exercitationum metaphysicarum libri duo* ([Leipzig]: Sumptibus Zachariae Schureri Bibliopolae, 1608).

<sup>3</sup> On the first reception of *Disputationes metaphysicae* in Lutheran context, see E. Lewalter, *Spanisch-jesuitische und deutsche-lutherische Metaphysik des 17. Jahrhunderts. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der iberisch-deutschen Kulturbeziehung und zur Vorgeschichte des deutschen Idealismus* (Hamburg: Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, 1935; Second edition: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), esp. 63–69; U. G. Leinsle, *Das Ding und die Methode. Methodische Konstitution und Gegenstand der frühen protestantischen Metaphysik*, Maro Verlag, Augsburg, 1985, esp. 221–254; J.-F. Courtine, *Suárez et le système de la métaphysique*, PUF, Paris, 1990, esp. Part IV.

<sup>4</sup> Let's recall the famous opening of the *Metaphysical disputations*: "*Divina et supernaturalis theologia, quanquam divino lumine principiisque a Deo revelatis nitatur, quia vero humano discursus et ratiocinatione perficitur, veritatis etiam naturae lumine notis juvatur, eisque ad suos discursus perficiendos, et divinas veritates illustrandas, tanquam ministris et quasi instrumentis utitur. Inter omnes autem naturales scientias, ea, quae prima omnium est, et nomen primae philosophiae obtinuit, sacrae ac supernaturali theologiae praecipue ministrat.*" – DM Prooem.

“natural” discourse – nor is it simply added afterwards, at the end of the discourse, as the goal it was preparing to achieve.

In order to develop a pure metaphysics, the sole condition required is the minimum concept of being *qua* being (as real being), and all reference to the origin of being can be left aside. *Nota bene*, however: Suárez does not say that we *must* leave aside such a reference, but only that we *can*; and this is sufficient for a natural foundation of the order of being. On the other hand, the preparatory character (*praeambulum*) of metaphysics as distinct from theology is not to be understood in the sense that metaphysics lacks the definitive basis theology alone can give it, but only in the sense that metaphysics must first provide the basic concepts needed to develop the discourse on supernatural revelation.

The solution chosen by Suárez is unusual: to think adequately about the supernatural order of creation, revelation and redemption, this order must be recognized as already present within the purely natural order, even if it is hidden, in the form of pure concepts. This is a position we could undoubtedly call “baroque”, which arose after the decrees of the Council of Trent, and which in some authors generated the idea of reuniting those elements that the Reformation had dramatically separated (natural and supernatural, *ratio naturalis* and *gratia supernaturalis*) and, even more radically, of assimilating them.

In order to understand the mystery of creation and redemption, we must no longer weaken the natural order, but instead emphasize it. However, the opposite is also true: the metaphysician can grasp the nature of being *qua* being (that is, leaving aside the fact of being or not being created) because the theologian already knows (through revelation and faith) the fact that every thing can “be” only in relation to the source of being. This is what Hans Urs von Balthasar once called the “vicious circle” of neo-scholasticism:<sup>5</sup> the theologian already knows, thanks to revelation, the source and significance of things, yet precisely because of this knowledge, paradoxically, he is no longer able to grasp the philosophical mystery of being, which is now perfectly conceivable by the human intellect, not in the sense that we know being as God knows it, but in the sense that, due to the imperfection of our intellect, we can know everything in the most common and abstract way, that is, as being (*ens inquantum ens*).

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<sup>5</sup> “Der neuscholastische Zirkel ist beinah ausweglos: da die biblische Eröffnung der Tiefen Gottes, die mit dem ‚heiligen Geist‘ zusammen auch der Geistbegabte ‚durchforscht‘ (1 Kor 2, 10–12), das philosophische Mysterium des Seins scheinbar zu überspringen einladet, und mit dem Schwund des philosophischen Geheimnisbewußtseins auch das theologische dahinschwindet, das doch nach dem Axiom ‚gratia supponit, non destruit, elevat naturam‘ ein gesteigertes und vertieftes Gefühl für das Herrlichkeitmysterium sein müßte. Von einem solchen Gefühl aber strahlen die klerikalen neuscholastischen Lehrmittel mit ihrem apologetischen Bescheidwissen über Alles und Jedes überhaupt nichts mehr aus” – H. U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, Bd. III.1: *Im Raum der Metaphysik*, Teil 2: *Neuzeit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1965), 386–387.

Indeed, in a Calvinist and Lutheran context, the approach of Jesuit authors, such as Perera, Fonseca and Suárez, is victorious even over Aquinas' metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> For Suárez, we must not start with beings existing in the world in order to seek their principles and causes, leading to the existence of God as First Cause. Instead, we must elaborate the concept of being *qua* being (leaving aside all the possible determinations it can have and therefore also leaving aside the difference between the being of the infinite Creator and finite, created being) as a single, unified concept, which includes all that is or can be, and is based on the simple principle of non-contradiction. The minimum requirement, by which "something" can be conceived without contradiction, is all that is needed for the foundations of the whole metaphysical discourse, which will then, but only then, proceed through an analysis of the different ways of being of an entity.

From this perspective, metaphysics comes to be articulated in a new way as different from the great Aristotelean tradition, and the two themes which in the latter were always structurally linked – the investigation of being *qua* being and of the properties inherent in it, on the one hand, and the investigation of the most elevated form of being, the Divine, on the other – are definitively separated. A few years after the publication of the *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, a new discipline would be dedicated to the investigation of being; it would receive the technical name of Ontology. According to the latest research, the first occurrence of this term is in the *Ogdoas scolastica* (1606) by the Calvinist theologian and metaphysician Jakob Lorhard, or Lorhardus.<sup>7</sup> A century later, this discipline would constitute the "*Metaphysica universalis*" of which Baumgarten speaks in his manual, distinguishing it from the "special" branch of metaphysics dedicated to the different determinations of being, which would include a rational cosmology, psychology and theology.

### 3. KANT AND THE SCHOLASTIC TRADITION

Considering the way in which Suárez entered German philosophy, it is hardly surprising to find his influence in the doctrines of the *Schulmetaphysik*. Indeed, in this case, we can see a mirroring, or symmetrical phenomenon, with regard to Suá-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K. Eschweiler, "Die Philosophie der spanische Spätscholastik auf den deutschen Universitäten des Siebzehnten Jahrhunderts", in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kulturgeschichte Spaniens*, ed. H. Finke (Münster: Verlag der Aschendorffschen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1928), 275–283, 289–302; E. Lewalter, *Spanisch-jesuitische und deutsche-lutherische Metaphysik*, 27–29; *ibid.* 60–76; P. Di Vona, *Studi sulla scolastica della Controriforma. L'esistenza e la sua distinzione metafisica dall'essenza* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1968); J.-F. Courtine, "Ontologie ou métaphysique?", *Giornale di metafisica* 7 (1985): 3–24; Courtine, *Suárez et le système*.

<sup>7</sup> On the latest findings about the first occurrences of the term "ontology" see M. Lamanna, "Sulla prima occorrenza del termine «ontologia». Una nota bibliografica", *Quaestio* 6 (2006): 557–570. See also the website (<http://www.formalontology.it>).

rez's Jesuit metaphysics: rationalist scholasticism, while starting from a doctrinal and theological position which was very different from Suárez's (like Reformation Pietism with regard to Roman Catholicism), constitutes the rigorous attempt to found metaphysics in the deductive capacities of the human mind, not in opposition to a theological or ecclesiastical context, but as one of its constitutive elements. It is precisely this type of metaphysics that Kant would call "dogmatic" when speaking of Wolff or when reading the compendia by Eberhard and Baumgarten during his lessons.<sup>8</sup>

Although it is true that the Kantian new critical thought arose precisely from a redefinition of the transcendental character of "dogmatic" ontology, one might think that for Kant the metaphysics originating in Jesuit Aristotelianism was forever relegated to the past. Actually, the picture can be seen from another perspective. If Kant's thought represents a contestation of the late scholastic conception of metaphysics and its claims to think of the being of reality, at the same time it also represents a clamorous confirmation of Suárez's conception of *ens*, considered both as *essentia* and *existentia*. The starting point can be identified in Kant's famous thesis concerning ontology:

Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e. a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves. In the logical use it is merely the copula of a judgement. The proposition "God is omnipotent" contains two concepts that have their objects: God and omnipotence; the little word "is" is not a predicate in it, but only that which posits the predicate in relation to the subject. Now if I take the subject (God) together with all his predicates (among which omnipotence belongs), and say "God is", or "There is a God", then I add no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit the object in relation to my concept. Both must contain exactly the same, and hence when I think this object as given absolutely (through the expression "it is"), nothing is thereby added to the concept, which expresses merely its possibility. Thus the actual contains nothing more than the merely possible.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 35–36. See also *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 74; *Vorlesungen über die philosophischen Religionslehre*, Akademie-Ausgabe XXVIII.2.2: 1003–1007; *Logik. Ein Handbuch zu Vorlesungen*, Akademie-Ausgabe IX: 83–84.

<sup>9</sup> I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 626–627: "Sein ist offenbar kein reales Prädikat, d. i. ein Begriff von irgend etwas, was zu dem Begriffe eines Dinges hinzukommen könne. Esi ist bloß die Position eines Dinges. Oder gewisser Bestimmungen an sich selbst. Im logischen Gebrauche ist es lediglich die Kopula eines Urteils. Der Satz: Gott ist allmächtig, enthält zwei Begriffe, die ihre Objekte haben: Gott und Allmacht; das Wörtchen ist, ist nicht noch ein Prädikat oben ein, sondern nur das, was das Prädikat beziehungsweise aufs Subjekt setzt. Nehme ich nun das Subjekt (Gott) mit allen seinen Prädikaten (worunter auch die Allmacht gehöret) zusammen, und sage: Gott ist, oder es ist ein Gott, so setze ich kein neues Prädikat zum Begriffe von Gott, sondern nur das Subjekt an sich selbst mit allen seinen Prädikaten,

Already in *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763) Kant had stated that existence (*Dasein*) could not be a predicate. Indeed, when I say “God is an existing thing” it seems that I express the relation of a predicate to a subject, but this is not the case. In order to be precise I should say “Something existing is God”; that is, to an “existing thing” belong those predicates which, when taken together, we indicate with the word “God”. Therefore those predicates are posited in relation to this subject (God), while the thing which exists, with all its predicates, is simply “posited”.

Thus existence cannot be a predicate. When I say “God is an existing thing”, it seems that I express the relation of a predicate to its subject. Whereas, in actual fact, there is an inaccuracy in this expression. In order to be precise, I should say “Something existing is God”; that is, to an existing thing belong those predicates which, when taken together, we indicate with the expression “God”. These predicates are posited in relation to this subject; but the thing itself, together with all its predicates, is simply posited.<sup>10</sup>

Kant’s polemical target here is clearly the dogmatic philosophers’ concept of “existence”. Let us recall briefly the standard definitions of existence in Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (1739):

§ 40. The whole of the essential elements in what is possible, i.e. its internal possibility, is the ESSENCE (the being of something, the formal reason, the nature, the *quidditas* [...] the substance, the primary concept of being).

§ 55. EXISTENCE (act, actuality) is the whole of the affections which are co-possible in something, i.e. the completion of the essence or internal possibility, as much as it is inherent to the whole of its determinations.<sup>11</sup>

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*und zwar den Gegenstand in Beziehung auf meinen Begriff. [...] Und so enthält das Wirkliche nichts mehr als das bloß Mögliche.*” – *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 567.

<sup>10</sup> I. Kant, *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes*, Akademie-Ausgabe II: 74: “Das Dasein kann daher selber kein Prädikat sein. Sage ich: Gott ist ein existirend Ding, so scheint es, als wenn ich die Beziehung eines Prädikats zum Subjecte ausdrückte. Allein es liegt auch eine Unrichtigkeit in diesem Ausdruck. Genau gesagt, sollte es heißen: Etwas Existierendes ist Gott, das ist, einem existierenden Dinge kommen diejenigen Prädikate zu, die wir zusammen genommen durch den Ausdruck: Gott, bezeichnen. Diese Prädikate sind beziehungsweise auf dieses Subjecte gesetzt, allein das Ding selber samt allen Prädikaten ist schlechthin gesetzt.”

<sup>11</sup> A. G. Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* [first ed. 1739], editio 7. (Halae Magdeburgica, 1779); anastatic reprint (Hildesheim: Olms, 1963), § 40, p. 13: “Complexus essentialium in possibili, seu possibilitas eius interna est ESSENTIA (esse rei, ratio formalis, natura, quidditas [...], substantia, conceptus entis primus).” – § 55, p. 15–16: “EXISTENTIA (actus, actualitas) est complexus affectionum in aliquo composibilium i.e. complementum essentiae sive possibilitatis internae, quatenus haec tantum, ut complexus determinationum spectatur.”

Essence coincides, therefore, with the possibility that in a thing its specific attributes coexist, while existence is the completion of such a “whole”; that is, the fact that something missing is added to the simple possibility of a thing.

Ten years earlier, in *Philosophia prima sive Ontologia*, Wolff had spoken of the essential characteristics of being, defining them as “those which do not contradict one another”, and had defined existence as the completion of possibility (*complementum possibilitatis*):

§ 143. The elements of a being which do not contradict each other and do not effect each other are called *essential elements* (*essentialia*) and determine the *essence of a being*.

§ 174. For this reason I define *existence* as the completion of the possibility. [...] We will explain later what has to be added in order to complete the possibility and let a being pass to actuality. Indeed, in natural theology we will demonstrate what is the reason for the existence of divinity and the actuality of the universe; in cosmology we will demonstrate the way the existence of contingent beings is determined in the material world; in psychology the conditions for the actualization of possible beings in the human mind.<sup>12</sup>

Existence is therefore the “completion” of essence; that is, of the possibilities within the concept of a thing. This means that “possibility” – as logical non-contradiction, hence as the noetic essence of a thing – is the *primum* and the focal meaning of ontology, only *with respect to which* can we think (hence in second place!) of existence. That which is onto-logically possible exists, and not vice versa. As we read in Wolff’s *Ontologia*: “that which is possible is that which can exist”, in the sense that there is no reason to exclude existence, hence the possibility of existing is not something “extrinsic” to essence, but rather is logically “intrinsic” to it. Herein derives Wolff’s notion of *ens* as “that which can exist”; in other words, “that which does not reject existence”. In this way, Wolff can conclude that “the notion of being implies only a minimum level of existence” (*minime involvit*).

§ 132. The impossible cannot exist. The impossible is such that it implies contradictions.

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<sup>12</sup> C. Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive Ontologia, methodo scientifica pertractata, qua omnis cognitionis humanae principia continentur* [first ed. 1729], editio nova (Francofurti et Lipsiae, 1736); anastatic reprint in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. J. École, Abt. II, Bd. 3 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962), § 143, p. 120: “Quae in ente sibi mutuo non repugnant, nec tamen per se invicem determinantur, essentialia appellantur atque essentialia entis constituunt” – § 174, p. 143: “Hinc Existentiam definio per complementum possibilitatis [...] Dicitur existentia etiam Actualitas. Quidnam istud sit, quod accedere debeat, ut possibilitas compleatur & ens ex statu possibilitatis in statum actualitatis traducatur, suo ostendemus loco. In Theologia nimirum naturali demonstrabimus, quaenam sit ratio existentiae Numinis atque actualitatis universi; in Cosmologia, quomodo existentia contingentium in mundo materiali determinetur; in Psychologia denique, quo pacto in mente humana possibilia ad actum deducantur.”



§ 133. Only the possible can exist. [...] In the notion of possible there is nothing that shows why it could not exist and thus there is no sufficient reason for its non-existence. [...] This non-repugnance to existing or the possibility of existing is for intrinsic and not for extrinsic reasons.

§ 134. I call *being* that which can exist and has no repugnance to existing. [...] In general the notion of being does not imply existence at all; it implies only the non-repugnance to existence, i.e. the possibility of existing.<sup>13</sup>

That which we first conceive of being is its *essence*. (“Essence can be defined as that which is first conceived of being and in which is contained the sufficient reason why the other [components] actually inhere or can inhere [to being].”)<sup>14</sup> And it is here that Wolff adduces “Franciscus Suárez, of the Company of Jesus, who amongst the scholastics seems to us the one who has pondered most deeply questions of metaphysics” (*Franciscus Suárez e Societate Jesu, quem inter Scholasticos res metaphysicas profundius meditatatum esse constat*).<sup>15</sup>

In the *Disputationes metaphysicae* Suárez writes that “the essence of a thing is the first principle, radical and intimate, of all actions and properties that suit a thing, and for this reason it is called *the nature of each thing*”, as both Aristotle and Aquinas maintain. In a secondary sense, “in the order of our way of conceiving and speaking, the essence of a thing is that which is expressed by a definition, as Saint Thomas says [...] and in this sense we usually also say that the essence of a thing is that which is first conceived of it”.<sup>16</sup> After this, Suárez defines in what sense this essence is called

<sup>13</sup> Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia*, § 132, p. 113: “Quod impossibile est, existere nequit. Quod impossibile est, id contradictionem involvit.” – § 133, p. 114–115: “Quod possibile est, illud existere potest [...]. Nihil igitur in notione possibilis continetur, unde intelligatur, cur existere nequeat, adeoque ratio sufficiens nulla est, cur quod possibile existere nequeat. [...] illa igitur non repugnantia ad existendum, seu existendi possibilitas est quidpiam intrinsecum, minime autem extrinsecum.” – § 134, p. 115–116: “Ens dicitur, quod existere potest, consequenter cui existentia non repugnat. [...] Notio entis in genere existentiam minime involvit, sed saltem non repugnantiam ad existendum, seu, quod perinde est, existendi possibilitatem.”

<sup>14</sup> “[E]ssentia definiri potest per id, quod primum de ente concipitur, & in quo ratio continetur sufficiens, cur cetera vel actu insint, vel inesse possunt” (Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia*, § 168, p. 137).

<sup>15</sup> Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia*, § 169, p. 138.

<sup>16</sup> “Primo modo [= in ordine ad effectus vel passiones rei] dicimus, essentiam rei esse id, quod est primum et radicale, ac intimum principium omnium actionum ac proprietatum, quae rei conveniunt, et sub hac ratione dicitur natura uniuscujusque rei, ut constat ex Aristot., 5 *Metaph.*, text. 5; et notat D. Thomas, de Ente et Essentia, c. 1, et Quodlib. 1, a. 4, et saepe alias. Secundo autem modo [= in ordine ad nostrum modum concipiendi et loquendi] dicimus essentiam rei esse, quae per definitionem explicatur, ut dicit etiam D. Thomas, dicto opusculo de Ente et Essentia, c. 2, et sic etiam dici solet, illud esse essentiam rei, quod primo concipitur de re; primo (inquam) non ordine originis (sic enim potius solemus conceptionem rei inchoare ab his quae sunt extra essentiam rei), sed ordine nobilitatis potius et primitivis

“real”: 1) in a negative sense, a “real essence is one that does not imply any contradiction in itself, nor is it a mere invention of the intellect”; 2) in a positive sense, it is (*a posteriori*) “the principle, or root, of actual operations and effects”, while (*a priori*) “real essence is that which can actually be produced by God and can be constituted in the being of a real entity”.<sup>17</sup>

The last property is not adduced by Wolff, who instead immediately associates the other properties (that is, not implying contradiction and being the intrinsic principle, or root, of its other properties and consequent actions) with the modern, and specifically Cartesian, notion of “substance”. “Descartes,” writes Wolff, “has maintained the notion of essence that he took from scholastic philosophy [as practised] in the School of the Fathers of the Company of Jesus. Indeed, in *Principia Philosophiae* (part I, § 53), he says that one is the main property of every substance, that which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all the others refer.” Suárez therefore conceives being in all determined entities as a *praedicatum essentiale*, or real predicate, to use Kant’s formula. This is, however, on the condition of not taking the term *ens* in its participial sense (as a participle of the verb *sum*), hence in reference to its actuality, since in this case it can never be an essential predicate, except in God. If we confine ourselves instead to considering – as metaphysics does – the term *ens* as a noun, in other words, as that which indicates its essence, we can predicate it intrinsically of every determined being (creatures as well as the Creator), leaving aside the fact that the being of which it is predicated does or does not actually exist.<sup>18</sup>

Hence Suárez affirms that, as an essential predicate, *ens* is the perfect synonym of *res* and *quidditas*. Being is an essential predicate, like actual quiddity, which in turn is

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*objecti; nam id est de essentia rei, quod concipimus primo illi convenire, et primo constitui intrinsece in esse rei, vel talis rei, et hoc modo etiam vocatur essentia quidditas in ordine ad locutiones nostras, quia est id, per quod respondemus ad quaestionem, quid sit res. Ac denique appellatur essentia, quia est id, quod per actum essendi primo esse intelligitur in unaquaque re. Ratio ergo essentiae his modis potest a nobis declarari”* (DM 2, 4, 6).

<sup>17</sup> “*Quid autem sit essentiam esse realem, possumus aut per negationem, aut per affirmationem exponere. Priori modo dicimus essentiam realem esse, quae in sese nullam involvit repugnantiam, neque est mere conficta per intellectum. Posteriori autem modo explicari potest, vel a posteriori, per hoc quod sit principium vel radix realium operationum, vel effectuum, sive sit in genere causae efficientis, sive formalis, sive materialis; sic enim nulla est essentia realis quae non possit habere aliquem effectum vel proprietatem realem. A priori vero potest explicari per causam extrinsecam (quamvis hoc non simpliciter de essentia, sed de essentia creata verum habeat), et sic dicimus essentiam esse realem, quae a Deo realiter produci potest, et constitui in esse entis actualis”* (DM 2, 4, 7).

<sup>18</sup> “*Cartesius notionem essentiae, quam in Scholis Patrum Societatis Jesu ex philosophia scholastica hauserat, retinuit. Etenim in Principiis Philosophiae part. I. §. 53. una, inquit, est cujusque substantiae praecipua proprietas, quae ipsius naturam essentiamque constituit, & ad quam aliae omnes referuntur”* (C. Wolff, *Philosophia prima sive ontologia*, § 169, p. 138–139).

either an existing being in act or else “can” simply be such. The actuality, or existence, of *ens* is absorbed into its *aptitudo essendi*.

But the fact that an essence or *quidditas* is real cannot be understood without a relation to being or to the real entity in act; indeed, we can conceive as real an essence that does not exist in act only because being an actual entity is consistent (non-contradictory) with it: that is exactly what happens when it passes to actual existence. Therefore, even though being in act does not belong to the essence of the creature, the relation to being, or the aptitude to exist intrinsically and essentially, belongs to its concept. In this way being is an essential predicate.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. THE PROBLEM OF ONTO-THEOLOGY

But let’s return to Kant. In the *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* (*Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre*) of 1783–1784, published posthumously by Pölitz in 1817, Kant proposes a rigid comparison between the ontological concepts typical of the *Schulmetaphysik*, in particular looking at Eberhard’s *Preparation for Natural Theology* (*Vorbereitung zur natürlichen Theologie*, 1781) and Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*. Kant’s purpose in these lectures is to justify the concept of religion as “the application of theology to morality” (*Anwendung der Theologie auf Moralität*). But in order to speak of a “moral theology” even for Kant – and here he is in line with tradition – we must begin with the concept of God. In order to do so, Kant no longer uses the classic demonstrations of the existence of God provided by onto-theology, which considers the highest being as *ens realissimum* or *omnitudo realitatis*. Ontological proof, as well as cosmological and physico-theological proof are all rejected precisely because “being is not a real predicate”. Nevertheless, in order to think of a God that is only moral – that is, as the postulate of practical reason – we must first necessarily think of him as a possible being, in other words, as a simple “thing”. Thus Kant proposes to reformulate speculative, or transcendental, theology, especially “onto-theology”. In other words:

In onto-theology we consider God as the highest being, or at least we make this concept our foundation. But how will I be able to think of a highest being through pure reason, merely as a thing? [...] A highest thing, therefore, would have to be one which has all reality.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> “*Quod vero essentia aut quidditas realis sit, intelligi non potest sine ordine ad esse et realem entitatem actualem; non enim aliter concipimus essentiam aliquam, quae actu non existit, esse realem, nisi quia talis est, ut ei non repugnet esse entitatem actualem, quod habet per actualem existentiam; quamvis ergo actu esse non sit de essentia creaturae, tamen ordo ad esse, vel aptitudo essendi est de intrinseco et essentiali conceptus ejus; atque hoc modo ens praedicatum est essenziale*” (DM 2, 4, 14).

<sup>20</sup> I. Kant, *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre*, 1013–1014: “*Hier [in der Onto-theologie] betrachten wir Gott als das höchste Wesen, wenigstens legen wir zuerst diesen Begriff hier*

Nevertheless, the intellectual concept of God as a thing possessing every reality and as the foundation for the possibility of all things (since without a total reality we could not think of negations), does not mean that it indicates an actual object. In this case, essential reality (*Realität*) is completely autonomous and neutral with respect to actual reality (*Wirklichkeit*).

In this regard, Kant speaks of a minimum of theology (*minimum der Theologie*), which is based only on the fact that “my concept of God is possible and does not contradict the laws of understanding” (*daß mein Begriff von Gott möglich ist, und daß er den Verstandesgesetzen nicht widerstreitet*).<sup>21</sup> This minimum concept of God is enough to allow for a moral religion, even though we will never be able to achieve a “maximum of theology”, in other words, we will never know whether or not such a being necessarily exists.

Once again, the principle of Suárez’s metaphysics is affirmed, according to which the primary notion of being is thingness, or essential quiddity, leaving aside actual existence. Essence is understood as a possibility of existence (*aptitudo ad existendum*), a kind of neutral virtuality, the significance of which lies in the mere fact that a concept is thinkable without contradiction. In Kant’s case, therefore, the tradition begun by Suárez continues to act, only it curves in a new direction:

1. The ontological discourse on being *qua* being, which is preliminary to the actual determination of the different species of beings, conserves intact its value as a transcendental discipline. Here the ontological meaning of “transcendental” coexists with a new critical meaning.
2. The metaphysical discourse – in the sense of a natural theology – is no longer developed in relation to sacred doctrine or *theologia supernaturalis*, but in relation to morality. And so theological metaphysics continues to be understood as a *praeambulum fidei*, in which faith means pure rational faith.

## 5. SAFEGUARDING EXISTENCE

There is one final point, however, which attracts our attention. With his theory of being, Kant a) moves away decisively from the conception of being as an essential predicate, a conception which ran from Suárez directly to the *Schulmetaphysik*, but at the same time b) he conserves Suárez’s concept of being as transcendental possibility, a minimum “thing” that does not necessarily exist, but that can simply exist as non-

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zum Grunde. Wie werde ich mir nun ein höchstes Wesen blos als Ding durch die reine Vernunft denken können? [...] Ein höchstes Ding wird also ein solches seyn müssen, das alle Realität hat”. Transl. A. W. Wood and G. M. Clark, under the title *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), 44.

<sup>21</sup> I. Kant, *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre*, 998 (Eng. transl. 27).

contradictory. Paradoxically, Kant uses this concept in reference to the only being that for Suárez necessarily exists: God.

Now we still have to touch on the fact that the meaning of existence typically expounded by Suárez seems to survive in Kant's thought. For Suárez, being possesses the primary meaning of actual essence; that is, a possibility which is not a mere "potency" that needs to be realized thanks to the intervention of an "act"; but rather, it is an *aptitudo* to exist, a virtual tendency within essence itself. In a *physical* (or theological) sense, the aptitude which is proper to essence would be nothing if it were not created *ex nihilo* – that is, from a *nihil absolutum* – while in a *metaphysical*, or better ontological, sense, essence is a principle in itself, simply in virtue of the fact that it is the opposite of a *nihil negativum*; that is, of a logical impossibility: a kind of self-certification, we might say, of being with regard to its essence.

In the face of an essence thus conceived and self-certified, what does "existence" (that is, coming into and enduring in being) mean? It is well known that Suárez decisively rejects the *distinctio realis* between essence and existence formulated by the Thomist School (for instance, in Giles of Rome and John Capreolus), according to which created being would be the result of the composition of two distinct realities. Yet he also distances himself from the *distinctio modalis* of Duns Scotus, according to which existence would be distinguished from essence only because of the latter's finite nature (*ex natura rei*), hence, not as one reality is distinguished from another, but as a "modality" of essence is distinct from essence itself.

In a radical rereading of Scotus' position, Suárez formulates a *sola distinctio rationis* not only between essence and existence, but also between an "actually existing essence" and an "actual existence" (often called *esse in actu exercito*). An actually constituted essence means that it *can* exist, and in order to do so, it does not need anything other than its own intrinsic possibility. Suárez writes:

*Certum est apud omnes existentiam esse id quo formaliter et intrinsece res est actu existens; quamquam enim existentia non sit proprie et in rigore causa formalis, sicut neque subsistentia aut personalitas, est tamen intrinsecum et formale constitutum sui constituti, sicut personalitas est intrinsecum et formale constitutum personae [...]; hoc autem constitutum per existentiam [...] nihil aliud est quam existens ut sic [...]; hoc tamen non excludit quin aliis modis vel in aliis generibus causarum pendeat res existens ab aliis rebus in sua actuali existentia.*<sup>22</sup>

Everyone admits with certainty that existence is that whereby a thing exists in act, in a formal and intrinsic sense. Although existence is not properly and rigorously a formal cause – just as neither subsistence nor personality are [formal causes] – it is nevertheless the intrinsic and formal constituent of that which is constituted by it, in the same way that personality is the intrinsic and formal constituent of

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<sup>22</sup> DM 31, 5, 1.

the person [...]; but that which is constituted by existence [...] is none other than the existent as such, while what we mean by this term remains obscure, before clarifying the concept or the more general reason of existence in itself. Nevertheless, whatever this concept is, it is certain that the existent as such is formally constituted by existence alone, and that it depends on the latter almost as if this were its formal cause. This does not exclude, however, [the fact that] an existing thing can depend, in its actual existence, on other things in other ways and with other kinds of causes.

“That which is” therefore does not exist *primarily* in virtue of something external, but in virtue of its intrinsic constitution. In it resides the most profound sense of the created being of essence. Hence “the being of existence is none other than that being through which an entity is formally and immediately constituted outside its causes (*extra causas suas*), ceasing to be nothing and beginning to be something”.<sup>23</sup> In other words, existence does not refer *primarily* to an act of being that comes or happens to a thing from outside, but is already founded in its own thingness, as a virtual order. Existence, in other words, is not distinct from essence.

When Suárez affirms that the actual essence of a thing is not really, but only conceptually, distinct from its existence, he probably means that the order of Creation is already within it, immanent in the ontological constitution of that creature, and therefore essence cannot be conceived without an *ordo ad existentiam* or an *aptitudo ad existendum*.

Naturally this conception must have a *fundamentum in re* (a foundation in reality) in order not to fall into the error of thinking that existence belongs *per se* not only to the Creator’s essence but also to that of His creatures. Indeed, we must retain as an acquired datum (*oportet supponere*) that “no entity outside God possesses in itself its being, as a true entity”.<sup>24</sup>

On the one hand, therefore, existence is the intrinsic constituent of the actual essence of a thing, of its being; on the other, this feature of intrinsic-ness can never be understood as a being *ex se* of created, existing essence, but, on the contrary, as “the condition, limitation and imperfection of that being” (*conditio, limitatio et imperfectio talis entitatis*), which necessarily exists “starting from the influence of another thing”

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<sup>23</sup> “[E]sse existentiae nihil aliud est quam illud esse, quo formaliter et immediate entitas aliqua constituitur extra causas suas, et desinit esse nihil, ac incipit esse aliquid; sed huiusmodi est hoc esse, quo formaliter et immediate constituitur res in actualitate essentiae; ergo est verum esse existentiae.” (DM 31, 4, 6).

<sup>24</sup> “Dico tertio in creaturis existentiam et essentiam distingui, aut tamquam ens in actu et in potentia, aut si utraque actu sumatur, solum distingui ratione cum aliquo fundamento in re, quae distinctio satis erit ut absolute dicamus non esse de essentia creaturae actu existere. Ad intelligendam hanc distinctionem, et locutiones quae in illa fundantur, oportet supponere (id quod certissimum est), nullum ens praeter Deum habere ex se entitatem suam, prout vera entitas est” (DM 31, 6, 13, my emphasis).

(*ex influxu alterius*).<sup>25</sup> This provenance from something “other” no longer represents for Suárez the trace of a relation with the Creator, but rather the imperfection and limitation of *ens*.

When Kant says that being is not a real predicate, but simply the position of a thing, he intends this “position” as the reference of the object to the perceiving subject, without adding anything to the essence or to the possibility of the concept of that object. Often this theory of Kant’s is taken, and rightly so, as the safeguarding of existentiality; that is, of that which effectively exists in space and time, outside its concept.

But perhaps this theory can also be taken to mean the exact opposite. It is well known that for Kant existence is determined as a category belonging to the class of modality, as opposed to non-existence, and midway between possibility (as opposed to impossibility) and necessity (as opposed to contingency). Considered as the existence of phenomena, it can never, for Kant, be known *a priori*. In other words, we can never “foresee” what distinguishes the empirical intuition of one existence from that of another. The only existence we can know is the existence, the temporal conditions of which we can determine *a priori*, through “Analogies of experience” and the “Postulates of empirical thought in general”.

According to Kant, no one has ever managed to explain existence – nor possibility, nor necessity – and obtain an acceptable definition based on pure intellect alone. Every time this has been attempted, in reality, we have not gone beyond a simple tautology. Only in empirical synthesis can we become aware of this “excess” of existence with respect to the concept. Yet such a synthesis, in turn, is made possible only by the unity of the *a priori* synthesis of apperception. Existence is an absolute position, and is not reducible to the intellect; but at the same time it is only the *a priori* of our intellectual forms that can safeguard its irreducible nature. If this is the case, however, then existence will not bring anything new or different to what is possible *a priori*.

In Suárez, as in Kant, existence “says” the fact that a thing is, with all its determinations – but it says only this and nothing more. Here the dramatic consequence of this metaphysical position becomes manifest: existence can no longer be thought, but only “posited”. Whether it is a God that “posits” it, presupposed through faith,

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<sup>25</sup> “*Atque hinc colligitur, quo sensu verissime dicatur, actu existere esse de essentia Dei, et non de essentia creaturae. Quia, nimirum, solus Deus, ex vi suae naturae, habet existere absque alterius efficientia; creatura vero ex vi suae naturae, non habet actu existere absque efficientia alterius. [...] Ex quo manifeste fit ut ad veritatem hujus locutionis non sit necessaria distinctio ex natura rei inter esse et rem cujus dicitur esse, sed sufficere ut illa res non habeat entitatem suam, vel potius ut non sit, neque esse possit illa entitas, nisi ab alio fiat, quia per illam locutionem non significatur distinctio unius ab alio, sed solum conditio, limitatio, et imperfectio talis entitatis, quae non habet ex se necessitatem, ut sit id quod est, sed solum id habet ex influxu alterius*” (DM 31, 6, 14).

or a subject, presupposed in order to found knowledge, existence in itself no longer gives us pause for thought.

(Translated by Lisa Adams)

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