

On the Reality of Possibles

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This paper analyses Suárez's notion of "real" in his definition of "real being." Suárez says, "the nature of real being cannot be explained properly without comprehending what it is for it to be real."¹ Is real the same as existent? This question and the discussion that follows from it are extremely important for our understanding of Suárez's notion of beings of reason. It is evident that existent or actual beings are real beings and therefore are not beings of reason. However, what about "possible" beings? Suárez claims that possible beings are also real beings. If possible beings are real beings, then they cannot be beings of reason, since real beings are not beings of reason. The question, therefore, is what does Suárez mean by possible beings? Or, to put it in more relevant terms, by what criterion do we distinguish possible beings from beings of reason? The problem is that to understand Suárez's doctrine concerning the reality of possible beings we first have to understand his view on eternal truths and essences.

Cronin says:

What is in the thought of Suárez the nature of the being which is possible or potential being or objective being? It is not an actual being, nor is it that being which can exist merely within the intellect; possible or potential being is, then, that being which does not exist actually, either in the intellect or in nature. Yet, although it is not actual it is real; again, it is necessarily possible or potential. What is the ultimate nature of this being?... Suárez' clearest exposition of the ultimate nature and meaning of potential or possible being is found in his treatment of eternal truths.²

¹ Suárez, *MD*, vol. 1, disp. 2, sec. 4, (6), "no puede, en consecuencia, explicarse debidamente en qué consiste la razón de ente real sin comprender en qué consiste el que sea real." [418]

² Timothy J. Cronin, *Objective Being in Descartes and in Suárez* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1966) 46.

The problem does not end there, however, since Suárez's treatment of eternal truths is interrelated to his distinction between essence and existence; moreover, to endeavor to understand Suárez's distinction between essence and existence, an understanding of his view on the different kinds of distinctions is indispensable. Therefore, it seems that the attempt to obtain a more complete understanding of Suárez's view of the object of metaphysics will take us into some of the central tenets of Suárezian metaphysics: (A) the various kinds of distinction, (B) the distinction between essence and existence, and (C) his view on eternal truths.

(A) On the different kinds of distinction.

Suárez in disputation VII ("On The Various Kinds Of Distinctions")³ explains how many types of distinctions are possible and categorizes them. Suárez begins by noting that he will assume two propositions concerning two kinds of distinction, which he claims are self-evident. The purpose of the disputation, according to Suárez, therefore, is to investigate whether there is another kind, a third kind of distinction besides the two most evident ones. He says: "In this section two propositions are assumed as certain, and a third is the object of our inquiry."⁴ The first evident proposition is that there exist real distinctions. The second evident proposition is that there exist mental distinctions.⁵ First, let us consider Suárez's notion of real distinctions.

³ Suárez, MD, disp. 7; I will use the English translation from the Latin of disputation 7 by Cyril Vollert, S.J., Francis Suarez On The Various Kinds Of Distinction (hereafter VKD) (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1947).

⁴ Suárez, VKD 16. (MD, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 1 [9])

The most evident notion of a real distinction is the distinction between two separately existing things. This distinction is the most robust, since the two things are not united and exist apart from one another. For example, the distinction between a chair and a table is a real distinction. Suárez calls this type of distinction an *essential* distinction. There are real distinctions between things that are united, and these sorts of distinctions are more difficult to detect. He says:

It sometimes happens that really distinct things are united to one another, as is clear in the case of matter and form, or quantity and substance. In such instances it is often extremely difficult to perceive a real distinction, a distinction of thing from thing; for there may be in things a distinction that is less than a real distinction of this sort. This problem will presently engage our attention.⁶

Suárez claims that this sort of real distinction between parts that comprise a whole, e.g. form and matter, is not an essential real distinction but a *potentially* real distinction. A potentially real distinction is a real distinction between the parts that make up an integral entity and are not separable from one another without destroying that entity. However, when these parts are separated, they form two really distinct integral entities, neither of which is the same as the entity of their union. Suárez argues that there is a third and last type of real distinction, namely, the distinction between that which comprises, i.e. the parts, and the thing comprised, i.e. the whole. Now, let us turn to Suárez's discussion of mental distinctions.

⁵ Suárez, VKD 16 and 18. "First of all, it is self-evident that there is a real distinction among things." [16] (MD, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 1 [9]) "In the second place, it is certain that besides real distinctions there are mental distinction." (MD, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 4 [11])

⁶ Suárez, VKD 17. (MD, Vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 1 [10])

Suárez presents three different kinds of mental distinctions. First, Suárez makes the distinction between the reasoning reason distinction (*distinctio rationis ratiocinantis*) and the reasoned reason distinction (*distinctio rationis ratiocinatae*).⁷ Next, under the reasoned reason distinction, Suárez expounds two kinds of distinctions, namely, the distinction “from the nature of the case” (*ex natura rei*) and a “virtual distinction” (*virtualis distinctio*). First, let us consider the reasoning reason distinction.

The first kind of mental distinction, the reasoning reason distinction, is one that arises solely from the intellect. The distinction is constituted by the intellect and does not pre-exist the intellect’s contemplation of it. Moreover, the distinction does not exist in reality, and the distinction itself has no factual basis. Thus, the reasoning reason distinction is most properly called a mental distinction. For example, Kayla is distinguished from herself when being Kayla is predicated of her or she is said to be identical with herself.

The second kind of mental distinction, the reasoned reason distinction, entails two kinds of distinctions. Some philosophers have overlooked the subtle differences and have conflated these two.⁸ The first distinction, “from the nature of the case,” is one where the distinction is only recognized by the intellect. Thus, the distinction pre-exists the mental operation. This distinction is not a real distinction in the sense described above under real distinctions, since there do not exist two distinct things, although it is a distinction with a true foundation in reality insofar as the distinction truly exists. In

⁷ Suárez, VKD 18. (MD, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 4 [11])

this sort of distinction the distinction imposes itself on the intellect, and the intellect simply recognizes its existence. Suárez describes it as follows:

For this type of mental distinction can be understood as pre-existing in reality, prior to the discriminating operation of the mind, so as to be thought of as imposing itself, as it were, on the intellect, and to require the intellect only to recognize it, but not to constitute it. In this acceptation of the term the distinction would be called mental rather than real only because it is not so great, and in itself is not so evident, as a real distinction, and hence would need attentive inspection by the mind to discern it.⁹

Suárez realizes that this distinction is in principle identical to Duns Scotus' formal distinction. He says: "Some think that for Scotus himself the formal distinction is no other than the distinction of the reasoned reason, in the sense and manner explained by us."¹⁰ Moreover, Suárez realizes that it is improperly categorized as a mental distinction; instead, it should be considered a sort of real distinction. He says: "Although this [reasoned reason] is a highly improper term and can be equivocal... I wish to point out that such a distinction is not the true mental distinction we are dealing with at present, but coincides with a distinction from the nature of the case (*ex natura rei*)."¹¹

Suárez claims that there is another type of reasoned reason mental distinction that is unlike the latter sort of distinction just described. He says, "In another sense, however,

⁸ Heidegger commits this mistake in The Basic Problems Of Phenomenology, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1975) 96.

⁹ Suárez, VKD 18. (MD, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 4 [11])

¹⁰ Suárez, VKD 24. Suárez will acknowledge the truth of Scotus' objective distinction, but he will prefer to call it a modal distinction. (MD, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 13 [19])

¹¹ Suárez, VKD 18. (MD, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 4 [11-12])

there can be question of a distinction of the reasoned reason.”¹² He calls this distinction the “virtual distinction.” This distinction does not pre-exist the intellect’s entertainment of the distinction. In this sense, therefore, we can say that the intellect constitutes the distinction. Moreover, there does not exist (in extra-mental reality) any real distinction corresponding to the one conceived. Suárez says: “Hence the foundation that is held to exist in nature for this distinction is not a true and actual distinction between the things regarded as distinct.”¹³ Up to this point the description of this distinction is identical to the reasoning reason distinction. Nevertheless, there is one major difference and that is that this sort of distinction has a *factual foundation*. Suárez says, “for [if the distinction were real] then not the *foundation* [my emphasis] of the distinction but the distinction itself would precede mental operation.”¹⁴ Suárez is distinguishing between a pre-existent real distinction and a pre-existent factual distinction. The best way of elucidating the latter is through an example. The example Suárez gives is the predication of the attributes of God. When the theist says that God is just, omniscient, omnipotent, etc., he makes these predications as distinct attributes of God. However, God is simple and one, and thus there cannot be anything in God corresponding to the predications *in the way they are thought by the mind*. Nevertheless,

¹² Suárez, *VKD* 18. (*MD*, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 4 [12])

¹³ Suárez, *VKD* 18; see also *MD*, vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, (4), “*Por lo que el fundamento de esta distinción, que se afirma que existe en la realidad, no es una verdadera y actual distinción entre aquellas cosas que de este modo se llaman distintas*” In Latin: “*Unde fundamentum, quod decitu esse in re ad hanc distinctionem, non est vera est actualis distinctio inter eas res quae sic distingui dicuntur.*” [12]

¹⁴ Suárez, *VKD* 18. (*MD*, Vol. 2, disp. 7, sec. 1, 4 [12])

Suárez would maintain that the distinction has a factual foundation, since it is the case that all these predications are true of God.

In conclusion, we can say that in general¹⁵ Suárez maintains that there are four different kinds of distinctions. First, a real distinction (three various types of real distinction); second, Suárez's modal distinction (or Duns Scotus' objective distinction) or "the distinction from the nature of things"; third, a mental distinction; and fourth, "the virtual distinction." Let us now turn to the distinction between essence and existence.

(B) Distinction between essence and existence.

The most appropriate place to begin the discussion of essence and existence is with the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas. In *On Being and Essence*,¹⁶ St. Thomas accepts Aristotle's notion of hylomorphism in created physical substances. The composition of matter and form is the complete essence of the substance.¹⁷ The essence is the *quiddity* or what it is to be that thing or the whatness of the thing. Aquinas says: "For it is evident from what has been said that essence is what the definition of a thing signifies. Now, the definition of physical substances includes not only form but matter."¹⁸ To understand clearly Aquinas' notion of essence, we first must note his two notions of

¹⁵ Suárez categorizes distinctions in various other ways (e.g. positive and negative distinctions, real distinctions of beings of reasons, etc) but for our purposes the general distinction presented here is sufficient.

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, On Beings and Essence (hereafter BE), translated by Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949).

¹⁷ Aristotle would say that the form gives us more of the nature of the thing than the matter.

matter. The first is undesignated matter. The second is designated matter (*materia signata*). The latter is the particular and specific matter pertaining to the individual thing and thus is, according to Aquinas, the principle of individuation. Undesignated matter is matter in general and does not pertain to any individual in particular. Therefore, when Aquinas says that the essence of a created physical substance is matter and form, he means undesignated matter and not designated matter. This, according to Aquinas, is consistent with the claim that the essence is a universal and not a particular, and, therefore, it is completely definable. Aquinas says: “For we do not include in the definition of man this particular bone and this particular flesh, but simply bone and flesh, which are the undesignated matter of man.”¹⁹ Now that we have an understanding of what essence is for Aquinas, let us consider his thoughts on its relation to existence.

Aquinas claims that the essence of a substance, either created intelligible or created physical substance, is distinct from its act of existing. He says: “We find essence in created intellectual substances. Their act of existence is other than their essence, although their essence is immaterial. Their act of existing is thus not a separated one, but a received one.”²⁰ With respect to physical substances, he says: “We find essence in a third way in substances composed of matter and form. Their act of existence is

¹⁸ Aquinas, BE 30.

¹⁹ Aquinas, BE 32.

²⁰ Aquinas, BE 51. In this last sentence, we need to pay very close attention to Aquinas’ words. In his claim that they are not separable, he is denying the sort of real distinction that claims that two things are distinct in that they can exist apart. Cf. *supra*, 49.

received and limited because they have it from another.”²¹ Why is asserting a real distinction between essence and existence important? Before answering this question, I think it may be helpful to elaborate further Aquinas’ notion of a real distinction.

Suárez interprets Aquinas as maintaining a real distinction between essence and existence. He says: “The first [opinion] is that existence is a thing altogether really distinct from the essential entity of a creature. This is considered the opinion of St. Thomas.”²² The view that Aquinas’ real distinction between essence and existence is the distinction between two *things* may not be an accurate interpretation of Aquinas. This view has been attributed to Giles of Rome.²³ It is evident from what Aquinas says above, namely that the “act of existing is thus not a separate one, but a received one,”²⁴ that the existence and essence of either intellectual beings or physical beings are distinct but inseparable insofar as they are actual beings. It is my understanding, given this interpretation of Aquinas, that he is here advocating an attenuated view of the real distinction, closer to Scotus’ objective formal distinction or what Suárez calls the modal

²¹ Aquinas, BE 54.

²² Suárez, MD, disp. 31, vol. 5, sec.1, (3) [13]. I have used the English translation from the Latin of that disputation by Norman Wells, Francis Suárez On The Essence of Finite Being As Such, On The Existence of That Essence and Their Distinction (hereafter EED) (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983) 45.

²³ See Joseph Owens, “The Number of Terms in the Suárezian discussion on Essence and Being,” The Modern Schoolman 54 (1957): 161. “He [Suárez] seems to hesitate to attribute it to St. Thomas. He may have good reason for so hesitating, since the formulae in which this distinction is presented are nowhere used in the authentic works of the Angelic Doctor. Suárez lists the principal passages of St. Thomas which treat of the distinction between essence and being. Not one of these describes existence as a thing or a reality (*res*), and not one of them refers to essence as having an entity of its own when considered in abstraction from its existence. Nor does any of them characterize the distinction between a thing and its being as ‘real.’ ”

²⁴ Aquinas, BE 51.

distinction. Aquinas makes quite clear that while existence is something *received* by the essence and thus is not part of the essence, it is, once received, *inseparable* from that essence. Therefore, in actual beings existence and essence are distinct but inseparable. Given this interpretation of Aquinas' real distinction, there is a concern that needs to be addressed: What motivations lie behind the doctrine of the real distinction between essence and existence? The answer to this question will connect us with the very important issue concerning eternal essences and eternal truths.

Aquinas realized that essence could be known independently of existence. We can make true universal claims independent of place and time and of any existential factors. Therefore, we can consider essence in two aspects; first, in itself and abstracted from all existence. Aquinas says: "First, we can consider it [essence] according to its proper meaning, which is to consider it absolutely. In this sense, nothing is true of it except what belongs to it as such."²⁵ We can consider essence in a second way by considering it in an act of existence. This would entail the consideration of the essence of a particular individual thing. Aquinas also mentions essences that exist only in the mind and thus are not real. These are essential, since they allow for a clear realization that Aquinas intends the first characterization of essences to be real. This distinction between the contemplation of essences as independent of existence yet real and essences that exist either in an individual or in the mind provides, according to Aquinas, clear evidence that essence and existence are distinct. He says: "Now, every essence or quiddity can be

²⁵ Aquinas, BE 40.

understood without anything being known of its existing. I can know what a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant whether they exist in reality. From this it is clear that the act of existing is other than essence or quiddity."²⁶ In other words, I can know *what* something is without knowing *that* it is.

If any sort of real distinction is denied, then existence and essence must be simply a mental distinction. This is Suárez's position. Suárez says,

this [third] opinion asserts that existence and essence are not distinguished in the thing itself [*in re ipsa*], even though the essence, conceived of abstractly and with precision, as it is in potency, be distinguished from actual existence, as a non-being (*ens*) from a being (*ens*). Moreover, I think that this opinion as set forth is absolutely true.²⁷

Given Suárez's view on the distinction between essence and existence, let us now turn to the consequences of this view for the doctrine of eternal truths.

(C) On eternal truths

Suárez maintains that there is only a mental distinction between essence and existence. One consequence that arises from such a view is that it seems to deny eternal essences, since, given that there is no distinction between essence and existence, the commencement of the existence of a thing is the commencement of the essence as well, and the termination of the existence of a thing is also the end of the essence. Therefore, all essences would be temporal and thus contingent. Consequently, there would be no eternal essences except for that of God, which is existence itself. This in turn creates two further difficulties. The first problem concerns the implied denial of eternal truths,

²⁶ Aquinas, BE 46.

since, if there are no eternal essences, then there cannot be any eternal or necessary truths.²⁸ The rationale behind this conclusion is that for us to contemplate eternal truths there must be eternal essences these truths are about, and they must be independent and thus distinct from existence in some way. If there are no eternal essences, then all truths will be temporal and contingent. Therefore, it should be evident that the dependence of metaphysics on eternal truths and their dependence on eternal essences seem to be major motivating factors for maintaining a real distinction of some sort between essence and existence. A second problem Suárez will have to address is the problem concerning the ontological status of essences before they are created. Both problems are important and relevant to our main topic of beings of reason. However, the discussion of the latter problem takes us to the heart of the doctrine of the reality of possibles. Therefore, I will begin with a discussion of this problem.

“What the essence of a creature is before it is produced by God. Solution to this question”²⁹ is the title to the second section of disputation XXXI. With respect to the

²⁷ Suárez, EED, 52. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 1, 13 [21])

²⁸ For a complete contemporary discussion on this subject see (in chronological order): Cronin, Objective Being in Descartes and in Suárez (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1966); Norman J. Wells, “Objective Being: Descartes and His Sources,” The Modern Schoolman 45 (1967): 49-61; John P. Doyle, “Suárez on the Reality of Possibles” The Modern Schoolman 46 (1967): 29-48; James C. Doig, “Suárez, Descartes, and the Objective Reality of Ideas,” The New Scholasticism 51 (1977): 350-371; Norman J. Wells, “Old Bottles and New Wine: A Rejoinder to J.C. Doig,” The New Scholasticism 52 (1979-80): 515-523; Norman J. Wells, “Suárez On Eternal Truths,” The Modern Schoolman 58 (1981): 73-104; Norman J. Wells, “Suárez On Eternal Truths Part II,” The Modern Schoolman 58 (1981): 159-174; Norman J. Wells, introduction to On The Essence Of Finite Being As Such, On The Existence Of That Essence And Their Distinction, by Francisco Suárez (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983) and Norman J. Wells, “Descartes’ *Idea* and Its Sources,” The American Catholic Philosophic Quarterly 67 (1993): 513-535.

²⁹ Suárez, EED 57. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 1 [22])

answer to this question, no theist can consistently maintain a Platonic metaphysics of essences, in which essences have some intrinsic reality, since this would make God co-eternal with something else. Moreover, this view would not allow God to be omnipotent, because He would depend on something else for creation. There are, I'm sure, other inconsistencies in maintaining the traditional theistic view of God and a Platonic view of essences. I do not know of any medieval philosopher of any prominence, with the possible exception of John Scotus Eriugena, who did maintain a Platonic metaphysics of essences. Before Augustine, but certainly in the writings of Augustine, it was accepted by most philosophers that essences are in the mind of God or in the Divine intellect before their creation. Suárez in no way challenges this philosophical doctrine. However, he does ask, in discussing Scotus' view, what is the "being of being known [*esse cognitum*] [by God]?"³⁰ In other words, what is it for an essence to be in the divine intellect?

Suárez's answer to this question is that before they are created, essences are nothing. Thus, to be in the mind of God is not to be. To be the object of God's knowledge does not impart being to the thing. He says, "the essences of creatures, although they are known by God from eternity, are nothing; and they have not *true* [*verum* emphasis mine] real being, before they receive it when God *freely* [*per libertam Dei* emphasis mine] effects it."³¹ The words emphasized contribute importantly to the meaning of Suárez's doctrine and need to be further explained. First, the idea that God creates freely is

³⁰ Suárez, *EED* 57. (*MD*, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 1 [22])

essential to the Christian faith. This belief is derived from revealed theology and not natural philosophy and thus must be accepted on faith. Suárez's arguments seem to imply that the reality of essences and the freedom of God are inconsistent. So that if one maintains that the nature or essence of a creature is real in itself, then necessarily God must create that creature according to its real and necessary essence. He says, "one would be in error to say that God necessarily and without freedom communicates to creatures some real being participated in by Himself, however diminished, since it is a matter of faith that God does all His works according to the counsel of His own will."³² The second emphasis is important since Suárez implicitly maintains, as we shall shortly see, a distinction between "real being" [*ens reale*] and "true real being" [*verum ens reale*]. We can partially summarize Suárez's position up to this point by quoting the following passage:

The essence of a creature, or the creature of *itself* [*de se* my emphasis], and before it is made by God, has in *itself* [*in se* my emphasis] no true real being and in this precise sense of existential being, the essence is not some reality, but it is absolutely nothing [*sed omnino esse nihil*]. This principle is not only true but it is certain according to faith.³³

The emphasis added to "itself" in Suárez's statement above is indispensable for understanding what it is that Suárez means by the essence not having true real being [*verum esse reale*] or being nothing [*esse nihil*]. What Suárez means is that they are nothing or have no true being in and of themselves [*in se*]. Suárez's notion of "nothingness" unraveled in this way becomes less controversial and in some sense a bit

³¹ Suárez, *EED* 57. (*MD*, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 1 [22])

banal, since all that he is claiming is that essences that are part of the divine intellect are the same as God; thus they are nothing outside of God. There are various objections to this view, but there are two objections that are directly related to our discussion of beings of reason.

The first objection [Suárez's fourth]³⁴ claims that if these essences have no true real being and are only in the intellect of God, then they are simply beings of reason. Suárez says, "if the essence of a creature in itself and as it is [as] an object of God's simple intelligence is nothing real, then it will be a being of reason [*ens rationis*]."³⁵ Suárez responds to this objection by noting the main and significant difference between beings of reason and these essences in the mind of God. Suárez argues that the latter are distinct from beings of reason insofar as they are capable of existing, apt to exist, and in potency with respect to actual being. Hence, they are real possible beings. He says, "the nature is called creatable or possible, inasmuch as in itself it is real and apt for existing."³⁶ Moreover, using Capreolus' explanation, Suárez says:

Capreolus so explains this essential being [an essence before it is created enjoying essential being but not actual being] that, on the part of the creature, before it be produced by God, he [Capreolus] does not judge it to be some true thing distinct from God which would be absolutely beyond nothing, but that, on the part of the creature, he would say that there is a certain aptitude [*aptitudinem*] or, rather, non-repugnance [*non repugnantiam*] to being produced by God in such a being. *For in this lies the*

³² Suárez, EED 57. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 1 [21])

³³ Suárez, EED 57. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 1 [22])

³⁴ Suárez, EED 61. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 6 [26])

³⁵ Suárez, EED 61. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 6 [26])

³⁶ Suárez, EED 63. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 10 [29])

*distinction of creatures' essences from imagined and impossible things such as a chimera [my emphasis]. In this sense, creatures are said to have real essences even though they do not exist; however, they are said to possess real essences, not in act but in potency, not by an intrinsic potency but by an extrinsic one by the creator [my emphasis].*³⁷

Thus, Suárez maintains that some essences that are objects of the intellect of God but have no actual existence (i.e. are not true real beings) are not beings of reason. The difference between these essences and beings of reason is that the former can be created by God and can become true real beings. The latter cannot be created and are impossible beings. Thus, essences before they are created have the potential of being produced by God and are in potency with respect to existence. These essences Suárez considers to be real beings, as opposed to true real beings. Therefore, we can say that for Suárez true real beings include only existent beings, and real beings include potential or possible beings as well as existent beings. It should be noted that the potency that Suárez is referring to is not intrinsic, where the principle of development is in the thing itself, but rather extrinsic, in the efficient cause or creator.

We have traced the origin of Suárez's doctrine of possible beings to the divine intellect, and we have uncovered the distinction between possible beings and beings of reason. However, I continue to find Suárez's doctrine unclear and ambiguous. Possible beings, Suárez says, are those beings that can be created by God and are non-contradictory. Beings of reason are those that are impossible, imagined ("fabricated by the mind") and fictitious. The ambiguity lies in whether we are to understand non-

³⁷ Suárez, EED 58. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 2 [23])

repugnance as “logically possible” and whether logical possibility is to be taken as equivalent to having the potential of being created by God. I do not find the former controversial; however, I do find some difficulties with the latter. Why should identifying “the potential of being created by God” with “non-repugnance” present any sort of confusion? The problem is that Suárez is open to different interpretations. It may be that logical possibility is a necessary condition “of being apt to exist” but not a sufficient condition. What may also be required is to be in potency with respect to an extrinsic efficient cause, namely, God. This seems consistent with Suárez. He says, “The being which they call essential prior to divine effect or creation, is only an objective potential being (as many say, about this immediately), or by way of extrinsic denomination from the potency of God *and* [emphasis mine] a non-repugnance on the part of the creatable essence.”³⁸ This seems to suggest that “logical possibility” and “having the potential of being produced by God” are not the same.

In addition to requiring both for the category of possible real beings, there is the ambiguity of the property: “having the potential of being produced by God.” There seem to be two possible interpretations of this property. The first is that a thing is possible insofar as God can create such a thing. This interpretation refers to God’s omnipotence or power. The second interpretation is that a thing is in potency with respect to its efficient cause, God, insofar as God has decided to create it. This interpretation refers to God’s will and not so much to His omnipotence. It should be

³⁸ Suárez, *EED* 59. (*MD*, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 2 [24])

evident that these two interpretations make sense. Most Suárezian scholars have adopted the first interpretation. However, the second interpretation is very plausible, since God has freely chosen (this Suárez would support through revelation) to create one particular world and has freely rejected many possible worlds. Another way to view the cogency of this interpretation is to use the more neutral description “apt to exist.” For something to exist requires that God freely decide to create such a thing and that it be non-repugnant. The latter must be true since God cannot create what is logically impossible.

The first interpretation is also plausible, since in some absolute sense it is true that God, through His omnipotence, can create anything that is logically possible. However, this kind of potency, i.e. logical possibility, does not seem as real as what God has decided to create. To claim that these two are the same implies that God has decided to create everything that is logically possible, and this is absurd. Is it not possible that something be logically possible and not be in potency with respect to its being created? It seems to me perfectly reasonable and consistent with Christian doctrine, since God creates freely and may have chosen not to create many logically possible things. This difficulty that I am suggesting is not concerned with a problem of textual interpretation, since, even if we all agree that Suárez didn’t intend this particular interpretation, the difficulty still needs to be cleared up.

Most of the existing research on Suárez’s doctrine on the reality of possibles suggests that having the potential of being created is identical with being logically possible, and,

therefore, that the notion of possible beings can be reduced to the notion of logically possible beings. Doyle says: "This mere nonrepugnance of an essence is what Suárez, following earlier Scholastics, has also termed <<logical possibility.>>... The core reality of a merely possible thing, therefore, is its nonimpossibility or non-selfcontradiction."³⁹ However, I have also found some comfort in Wells' acknowledging the existence of some difficulties. He says:

The incomplete character of Suárez's response, in turn, must not be overlooked. Such an attitude of judicious restraint in accepting this initial statement [concerning eternal truths being part of the Divine knowledge and nothing on their own] as definitive is all the more fitting because this preliminary statement itself is not without its own internal perplexities and unresolved issues.⁴⁰

Wells' description of the ambiguity is different than mine. His concern seems to be that non-repugnancy (*potentia logica*) in the finite essence and being known by God (*potentia objectiva*) are not equivalent. The description of the latter creates more perplexities, since there seems to be a difference between being known by God and being in potency with respect to God's creation. It is true, however, that Suárez does seem to use them interchangeably. He says, "objective potential being *or* [emphasis mine] by way of extrinsic denomination from the potency of God."⁴¹ The former seems to be much broader than being in potency with respect to God's creation, since it seems quite possible that many things be known by God and not be created. Moreover, Wells claims that being known by God is broader than non-repugnancy, since God can know

³⁹ John P. Doyle, "Suárez on the Reality of Possibles" The Modern Schoolman 46 (1967): 42.

⁴⁰ Norman J. Wells, "Suárez on the Eternal Truths" Part I, The Modern Schoolman 58 (1981): 83.

impossible things. Therefore, according to Wells, being known by God may be a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition for real being, since non-repugnance is required for real being. Wells says:

For instance, it is all very well to say, as Suárez does, that the *non-repugnantia* on the part of finite essences prior to their creation designated by *esse potentiale obiectivum* is to be appreciated in the context of an *esse obiectivum* and so forth or a being-of-being known by the Divine intellect. Nonetheless, rather than affording a clear-cut solution to the issue, the problem seems more compounded. For, a chimera equally possesses such credentials. Accordingly, if the essences in question are possible because God knows them, then a chimera is equally possible. For God knows them as well. Consequently the basis for the obvious distinction between “real essences” and chimeras must be sought elsewhere than in their mutual mental existence. Wherefore, the whole issue is brought to bear upon the intrinsic *potentia logica* or *possible logicum*, purportedly independent of God’s omnipotence, and not upon the extrinsic consideration involved in the *esse potentiale obiectivum* in regard to God’s omnipotence.⁴²

Wells claims that Suárez’s doctrine of the reality of possibles has “been plagued by a failure to acknowledge the tensions which obtain between *potentia logica*, on the one hand, and *potentia obiectiva*, on the other, when dealing with the essences of creatures prior to existence.”⁴³ I think, instead, that the problem concerns the tension between *potentia logica* and the potential of being created, interpreted as God has decided to create it. To equate these two is to conflate God’s omnipotence with His freedom.⁴⁴

If Wells’ diagnosis is right, however, then Doyle is correct to maintain that non-repugnance is sufficient and necessary and thus is the same as possible being. Thus

⁴¹ Suárez, *EED* 59. (*MD*, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 2 [24])

⁴² Wells, “Suárez on the Eternal Truths” 83-84.

⁴³ Wells, “Suárez on the Eternal Truths” 169.

Wells' depiction of the perplexities is not at all controversial. The reduction, according to Doyle, of possible beings to logically possible beings can take place because everything that is logically possible is in the divine intellect. Since both being in the divine intellect and non-repugnance are required for something to be a real possible being, then being in the divine intellect would not be sufficient. Therefore, Wells' concern that, "if the essences in question are possible because God knows them, then a chimera is equally possible" has no foundation.

However, if Suárez's notion of "having the potential of being produced by God" were interpreted as being in potency with respect to its efficient cause, God, insofar as God has decided to create, it would create a difficulty. According to this interpretation, logical possibility is broader than "having the potential of being created," and, therefore, real possible beings cannot be reduced to what is logically possible. Nevertheless, I do not find sufficient reason for not interpreting "having the potential of being produced by God" as simply *being possible insofar as God could have created it*. If interpreted as such, there are no "internal perplexities" or "unresolved issues" as Wells suggests. We may conclude, therefore, that there are no inconsistencies in Suárez's thought with respect to the reality of possibles. My conclusion, however, differs slightly from the widely accepted view that possible being can be reduced to what is nonrepugnant or non-selfcontradictory. I maintain, instead, that possible being can be reduced to what is logically possible (in this I agree with Prof. Doyle); however, I

⁴⁴ See above citation 42 where Wells says, "in the *esse potentiale obiectivum* in regard to God's omnipotence."

disagree that nonrepugnance and non-selfcontradiction exhaust the category of logical possibility. Logical possibility means having the capability of being (*esse*) and therefore, in addition to excluding any repugnant or self-contradictory essences, it must also exclude *nothing*. Thus, there are privations and negations, such as blindness, that are not possible beings, not because they are self-contradictory, but because they are nothing.

To summarize, what Suárez means by possible being is a being that is “apt to exist.” For something to be “apt to exist” it must: (1) not be nothing, and (2) be non-selfcontradictory. It is not enough to satisfy (2), since privations are not self-contradictory and yet are not apt to exist or possible beings. They are not possible beings since they are not beings at all, and God cannot create something that intrinsically lacks being. Therefore, not being self-contradictory does not by itself guarantee that a thing is a possible being.

There is another issue that has some bearing on the discussion of possible beings.⁴⁵ It concerns the scope of what is to be included in the domain of logical impossibility. Is a chimera a logically inconsistent being? Is it a possible being? Or is it a being of reason? Suárez claims that a chimera is a being of reason and therefore cannot be a possible being. Since a chimera is not a privation or negation, it must be self-contradictory. Why would Suárez claim that a chimera is a logically impossible being?

⁴⁵ I want to thank Prof. Gracia for suggesting this possibility, which led me to investigate it further.

Suárez defines logical possibility and impossibility in terms of existence, so that which cannot exist is logically impossible and what can exist is logically possible. One way to make this distinction clearer is to say that that which cannot exist are privations that have no being in and of themselves, such as blindness, and beings that are intrinsically self-contradictory, such as a round-square. Both of these are impossible beings, insofar as their existence is impossible. However, they differ insofar as the former simply lacks a reference or refers to something that is empty, while the latter refers to a contradiction in terms. In the discussion that follows I am only concerned with the latter.

What is it for something to be a contradiction in terms? We can use the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction to answer this question. The essence of a square is identical to the essence of a square, and the essence of a square is not identical to the essence of a circle. The essence of a circle is that it is round. The essence of a square is that it has four sides. Thus, given the principle of non-contradiction, it cannot be the case that there exists a round-square. But this is true because the essence of a circle and that of a square are logically incompatible.

Philosophers frequently distinguish a logical impossibility from a physical impossibility. They maintain that while the former presents an internal contradiction the latter does not. So, they would hold that there are many instances of things that do not exist because they are physically but not logically impossible, such as a flying man. It is physically impossible for a man to fly, given the laws of nature and the nature of

man. This distinction, therefore, between physical and logical impossibility is quite commonly held. I want to argue that this distinction is not appropriate in all cases.

Someone who maintains an ultra-realist or Platonic view of universals could say that it is a contradiction in terms to say that human beings can fly, everything else being equal, such as the laws of nature. This seems to follow from our analysis of the concept of a round-square. The round-square is contradictory because the essence of a square is such that it is incompatible with the property of roundness. For an ultra-realist, one may argue, the essence of a human being is such that flying is incompatible with it, and thus it is logically impossible for a human being to fly. Of course, this is only true for essential properties or properties that belong to a being in a real and essential way, so that if that property is missing then no being could be the being in question. As a consequence, if a man were to fly (all things being equal) it would not be a man anymore but a being of another sort.

This seems to be a cogent argument and would help explain why Suárez seems to think that fictitious objects or objects fabricated by the mind, such as a three-headed man with eight arms, are not possible beings. Suárez says:

Although the truth of these connections [the connections between a subject and a predicate], as real and actual truth, remains only in the divine intellect, nevertheless the necessity of this truth and the primary source and origin of such a connection, does not seem to be able to be referred to the divine exemplar. For the divine exemplar itself had this necessity of representing man as rational animal; nor was it possible to represent that of another essence; this proceeds from no other source, except because man cannot be of another essence, for, by the very fact that

a thing be of another essence, it is no longer man. Consequently, this necessity arises from the object itself and not from the divine exemplar.⁴⁶

Suárez's position is difficult to understand because he seems to be holding what appears at first to be incompatible views with respect to essences. On the one hand, he maintains that there are no eternal essences, but only the mind of God and objective essences. In other words, Suárez is not an ultra-realist with respect to the ontological status of essences. His view is that before they are created they are nothing, and when their existence terminates they perish.⁴⁷ On the other hand, he seems to advocate an *ultra-realist position with respect to the definitions of essences*, so that if a certain essence exists, then it must have a given set of essential properties. This necessity is not only applicable to finite beings but to God as well. As we will see shortly, the distinction between this latter position, which I will call the *ultra-realist view of the definition of essences*, and the former Platonic view, which I will call the *ultra-realist view of the ontological status of essences*, is central to Suárez's notion of eternal truths. Let us now turn to eternal truths.

We have seen that maintaining a mental distinction between essence and existence engenders an objection concerning eternal truths. Suárez states the objection as follows, "essential predicates are predicated or can be predicated truly of the essence from eternity; every truth, however, is based on some being."⁴⁸ Suárez mentions the

⁴⁶ Suárez, *EED* 205-206. (*MD*, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 46 [184])

⁴⁷ Cf. footnote 31 and pp. 60-61.

⁴⁸ Suárez, *EED* 60. (*MD*, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 2, 6 [26])

objection again in a further section of the same disputation where he treats it in more detail.⁴⁹ He says:

If, with the removal of existence, the essence perishes, then those propositions, wherein essential predicates are attributed of a thing, are not necessary nor possessed of eternal truth; but the consequent is false and contrary to the opinion of all philosophers. Because otherwise all the truths dealing with creatures would be contingent, hence there would be no science of creatures, because this concerns only necessary truths. The sequence is proved, because if, with the removal of existence, essence is nothing [*ablata existentia, essentia nihil est*], , therefore neither is it a substance, nor an accident, and consequently, neither a body nor a soul nor other things of this kind. Therefore, no essential attribute can be rightly predicated of it.⁵⁰

Suárez considers three possible responses to this difficulty. The first is to accept the apparent consequences and thus deny that there are necessary truths. Suárez rejects this response. On the contrary, he cites both St. Augustine and St. Anselm as maintaining that the existence of eternal truth is essential to Christian doctrine and can be found in the tradition. He says,

For Augustine says, Bk. 2 *On Free Choice*, ch. 8: 'three and four are seven is eternally true even if there be nothing to be numbered.' In the same sense he says, Bk. 4 *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, c. 7: 'Six is the perfect number, not because God perfected all things in six days but rather the converse; and so God perfected all things in six days because the number is perfect, and it would be perfect even if those things were not.' Similarly, Anselm, in the dialogue *On Truth*, c. 14, expressly claims that the truth of these propositions is eternal, and not destroyed even if the things themselves are destroyed.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Suárez, [EED](#) 199. ([MD](#), vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 38 [176])

⁵⁰ Suárez, [EED](#) 199. ([MD](#), vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 38 [176])

⁵¹ Suárez, [EED](#) 199-200. ([MD](#), vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 39 [176-77])

The second possible response is that eternal truths are true in the divine intellect and not in themselves, so that there are no eternal and necessary truths in and of themselves, but, instead, only insofar as they are in the Divine intellect. The beneficial consequence of such a view is that it can maintain necessary truths without having to maintain necessary essences. However, Suárez rejects this solution, since it obliterates the special character of necessary truths. Suárez does not reject the opinion as completely false, since he maintains that necessary truths are in the intellect of God, but, so are contingent truths. What he objects to is that this solution does not capture the special character of necessary truths, which is that they are true in and of themselves and are not contingent on any given event in time. Thus they are *necessarily* and not just contingently in the Divine intellect. Contingent truths are also *eternally* in the divine intellect, according to Suárez; however, they are not there necessarily but only contingently, dependent on some future event in time. Suárez says: “Again, those enunciations are not true because they are known by God but rather they are thus known because they are true; otherwise no reason could be given why God would necessarily know them to be true.”⁵² It is difficult to make out what exactly Suárez is referring to when he says “those enunciations.” It seems that he is referring to necessary truths, but this may not be a correct interpretation. What Suárez means is that there are truths that are in some sense independent of God’s will, and these are known by God because they are true and not true because they are known by God.

⁵² Suárez, *EED* 200. (*MD*, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 40 [178])

Suárez says: “For if their truth came forth from God Himself, that would take place by means of God’s will; hence it would not come forth from necessity, but voluntarily.”⁵³

It is true that necessary truths are of this sort, but it may also be the case that some contingent truths are also of this sort, such as the acts of free rational agents.

The third possibility is to maintain that while eternal essences do not exist, there are eternal connections between temporal essences and their temporal predicates. Suárez describes this view as follows:

Many of the authors cited explain this opinion in such a way as to say that in fact the essences of creatable things are not eternal, absolutely speaking, as we proved above in section two, but the connection of the essential predicates with the essences themselves are eternal.⁵⁴

This view is attributed to Soncinas and Sylvester. Suárez gives three arguments as refutations of this opinion.

In the first argument Suárez questions the ontological status of the connection in question. He says: “It is either something or nothing.”⁵⁵ Now, if it is something then how can it be independently of the efficient cause of God? It is implicitly assumed here that anything that is something cannot exist independently of the efficient cause of God. He goes on to say: “If nothing, it is indeed not surprising that it does not have an efficient cause; but it is surprising that it could be eternal or that there would be a real connection, if it is nothing.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Suárez, EED 200. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 40 [178])

⁵⁴ Suárez, EED 201. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 41 [178])

⁵⁵ Suárez, EED 201. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 42 [179])

Suárez's second argument turns to the lack of foundations of these connections. He says, "a connection is nothing else than a union; but a union must be a thing or the mode of a thing. Consequently, if nothing is eternal, then there can be no eternal union of things, because the mode of a thing cannot be without the thing."⁵⁷

Finally, Suárez argues that the truths about essences, such as, "man is a rational animal," depend on the existence of the essences themselves, such as man and animal. Therefore, there cannot be truths of essences that do not have an efficient cause when the essences, which the truth is about, do have an efficient cause. Suárez says: "For the truth of an essence is really nothing else than the essence itself, or at most, it is thought to be a property intrinsically joined to the essence."⁵⁸ This is the last of the objections against this interpretation of eternal truths. Next, I will present Suárez's solution to the problem of eternal truths.

Suárez's solution, which is guided by his view of the distinction between essence and existence, is probably one of the most contentious and also misunderstood views in neo-scholasticism. Its first critic is thought to be Descartes. Cronin says:

In the cartesian *corpus* there are two texts which seem to indicate that there were some philosophers or theologians who maintained a doctrine wherein the eternal and necessary truths were independent of God. These texts, together with the frequent references of Descartes to that same doctrine, have puzzled historians of philosophy. Since 1913, however, P. Garin has indicated, first of all, that within scholasticism a distinction must be made between the philosophy of St. Thomas and that of Suárez,

⁵⁶ Suárez, EED 202. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 42 [179])

⁵⁷ Suárez, EED 202. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 42 [179])

⁵⁸ Suárez, EED 203. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 43 [180])

and, secondly, that in opposition to the suárezian doctrine of eternal truths Descartes has established his position.⁵⁹

It is thought, therefore, that the adversary that Descartes does not mention by name is Suárez. It is true that Suárez's position is somewhat awkward and complex. However, if Cronin's interpretation of Descartes' criticism of Suárez is correct, then I will show that both Descartes' and Cronin's interpretation of Suárez are unfounded.

Suárez claims that the central problem concerning eternal and necessary truths is caused by a confusion concerning the interpretation of the copula "is," which connects the subject with its predicate. Suárez argues that there are two interpretations of "is" in the proposition (1) *man is an animal*. The first one includes an existential import such that (1) *man is an animal* can be interpreted as saying (2) there exist such things as men and animals, and man is an animal. If (1) equals (2), then (1) can only be necessary and true if there necessarily exists an eternal essence of man and of animal. Suárez claims that this interpretation of the copula "is" connects it to *time* so that it implies an actual eternal duration in time. He says: "In the first instance, the truth of the propositions undoubtedly depends on the existence of the terms [*existentia extremorum*], because, in terms of that signification, the word *is*, is not divorced from time [*tempore*]. Or (which is the same thing) it indicates a real and actual duration [*actualem durationem*]." ⁶⁰

There is another possible interpretation of the copula "is" in the proposition (1) *man is an animal*, which does divorce it from time so that "is" carries no existential import with respect to the subject or predicate. It is in this sense that Suárez believes we should

⁵⁹ Cronin, Objective Being in Descartes and in Suárez 37-38.

interpret (1) as a necessary and eternal truth. Suárez claims that by interpreting the copula “is” in this way (1) can be reduced to a conditional or hypothetical proposition, such as, (3) “*if it is a man, it is an animal* [*si est homo, est animal*].”⁶¹ Given Suárez’s position, let me now state Descartes’ criticism. Descartes says:

As for eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independent of Him. If men [the Cartesian adversaries] really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it. In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. So we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true [Suárez’s position]; for the existence of God is the first and the most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which all others proceed.⁶²

How could we view this criticism in light of what has been already said concerning Suárez’s view on eternal truths?

There certainly is some truth to the criticism, but I think it is based on a misunderstanding of Suárez. The fact that eternal truths are independent of any efficient cause does not make anything independent of God because of the special nature of eternal truths themselves, namely, their being conditionals. Suárez is aware of this. He says:

Indeed, in this same sense these connections [conditional eternal propositions, e.g. *If it is a man it is an animal*] not only do not require an efficient cause in act, but also they do not seem to demand one in potency,

⁶⁰ Suárez, EED 203. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 44 [181])

⁶¹ Suárez, EED 204. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 45 [183])

⁶² René Descartes, “Letter to Mersenne” May 6, 1630, The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. III, trans. by John Cottingham, et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 24.

if we take our stand formally and precisely on their truth. This can be clarified by the argument made about a conditional proposition, whose truth does not depend upon an efficient cause or one able to effect.⁶³

Moreover, Suárez has stated in various places that nothing that has real being is independent of the efficient cause of God, since God is the creator of all things.⁶⁴ But eternal truths, as conditionals, do not have actual being (*esse*) and thus are not actual beings (*entia*). They are beings of reason. Suárez says, “Now the being of truth in a proposition of itself is not a real and intrinsic being, but it is an objective being in the intellect [*obiectivum in intellectu*] as it is composing; hence it belongs also to privations.”⁶⁵ Let us, therefore, discuss the truth of conditionals and what is required to make them necessary and eternal truths.

It should be noted that this diversion into the philosophy of language and logic by Suárez is very similar to Bertrand Russell’s solution to the problem of non-denoting words. In Russell’s case, the exact opposite is being emphasized, i.e. the existential import in the meaning of the copula “is.” Russell says that the proposition “The King of France is bald” means “there exists one and only one king of France, and he is bald.” Suárez acknowledges that this is one interpretation of the copula “is,” and, moreover, it is the interpretation that he, unlike Russell, intends to avoid. For Suárez, the proposition “man is an animal” does *not* mean “there is a man and there is an animal, and man is an animal.” Instead it means, “if there is a man it is an animal.” The truth of

⁶³ Suárez, EED 204-205. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 45 [183])

⁶⁴ Cf. *supra*, footnote 33 pp. 61-62 and pp. 76-77.

⁶⁵ Suárez, EED 45. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 1, 2 [12])

this conditional is eternal and necessary, according to Suárez. Suárez by this interpretation avoids the necessity of an actual or existent foundation for the essences in question. He therefore does not require actual eternal essences to maintain that there are eternal truths, and thus he does not require an ultra-realist view of the ontological status of essences. However, it is difficult to understand what, if not some eternal essences of some sort, serves as the foundation for the necessity of the truths in question. Suárez is aware of the need for some sort of foundation. He says,

it has still not been explained what that necessary connection of nonexisting terms is. For since it posits nothing in reality, it is difficult to understand how it can afford a basis for necessary truth. For, neither is it satisfactory if we were to say that, with the existence of things removed, this connection remains only in the Divine exemplar and that such a necessity arises from that.⁶⁶

Let me now present Suárez's foundation.

Conditional propositions are eternal and necessary for Suárez because he maintains an ultra-realist view of the definition of essences. One way of articulating Suárez's notion of necessity is to interpret it in terms of modal logical semantics, so that in any possible world or in any possible circumstance in which God could have created man, it would have been necessary that man be an animal. We have to be careful and not confuse Suárez's position with a Platonic realist position. It is not the case, according to Suárez, that there exist some real definitions of essences by which God is bound. Instead, Suárez takes necessary truths stated in conditional propositions to be nothing more than identity statements. Therefore, necessary propositions are founded on the

⁶⁶ Suárez, *EED* 205. (*MD*, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 46 [184])

law of identity, and thus it is true, as Suárez claims, that God knows them because they are necessarily true, and it is not the case that they are true because God knows them. If we were to employ a more modern vocabulary, which would be foreign to Suárez, we could say that for Suárez all necessary truths are analytic propositions, understood here in the Kantian sense as propositions in which the predicate is already included in the subject, and thus do not say anything new about the subject. Therefore, for Suárez the proposition “a bachelor is an unmarried man” is an eternal necessary truth to be interpreted as “if there is a bachelor then he is unmarried.” In scholastic terminology we would say that the predicate, such as animal, is part of the essence of the subject, such as man. Or we could describe the necessity as a *de re* modality as opposed to a *de dicto* modality. Thus, as Suárez points out, the foundation for necessary truths is not found in propositions but in objects themselves. This view has also been called *essentialism*. Suárez describes it as follows,

... it seems we have to say that this connection [the connection between the subject and predicate of a necessary proposition] is nothing else than the identity of the terms [*identitatem extremorum*] which are in essential and affirmative propositions. For every truth of an affirmative proposition is founded on some identity or unity of the terms [*in aliqua extremorum identitate vel unitate*] which, though conceived of by us in a complex way [synthetic], and by way of joining of a predicate with a subject, is still in reality nothing but the very entity of the thing. But identity, since it is a property of being, is found proportionally in every being or in every state of being. Consequently, just as any existing man or animal are the same in reality, so a possible man, or anything that can be an object of the science or exemplar of man, has identity with animal taken proportionally. Hence, this identity is sufficient for founding that necessity, and it can be found in a being in potency, though it is nothing in act, because it adds nothing to a

being in potency except a relationship of reason in regard to our concepts.⁶⁷

Therefore, for Suárez, the proposition “a man is an animal” is just as true and necessary as “a man is a man.” Neither of these requires the existence of these essences, since it is always true, whether there exists a man or not, that “if a man exists then it is a man.” It should be apparent, then, that there can be eternal truths concerning impossible beings or beings of reason. Suárez says, “... this proposition: ‘*Every animal is able to sense,*’ does not of itself depend on a cause which can effect an animal. Thus, if, by way of the impossible, there were no such cause, that enunciation [an impossible enunciation] would still be true, just as this is true: ‘A chimera is a chimera.’”⁶⁸ Suárez, therefore, cautions that we should make the distinction between necessary truths concerning real beings and necessary truths concerning beings of reason. The former, Suárez claims, concerns terms that have been abstracted from actual existence. He says, “in the former [real beings] the connection is so necessary in terms of an intrinsic relationship of terms abstracting from actual existence, that it is still possible in relation to actual existence.”⁶⁹

Suárez concludes by examining one last proposition, “man is” or “man exists.” Suárez claims that in one sense the predicate “existence” works like that of “animal,” so that in any possible world or in any possible circumstance in which God would have

⁶⁷ Suárez, EED 206. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 46 [184-185])

⁶⁸ Suárez, EED 205. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 45 [183])

⁶⁹ Suárez, EED 205. (MD, vol. 5, disp. 31, sec. 12, 45 [183])

created man he would have existed. So the proposition “if man is, man exists” is necessarily true. However, Suárez notes a difference between the predicate “existence” and all other predicates. He claims that its distinguishable character is evident from the complex proposition “if man is, then man exists.” “Existence” is a simple and absolute predicate so that the proposition “man exists” does not convert into “if it is a man it exists,” since for Suárez the latter proposition does not express an identity in all the different modes of being including possibility. On the other hand, man, even if non-existent, is still an animal. In the case of existence, all possible modes of being are precluded, and thus it is *not* the case that “man exists” is a necessary truth. We can see this in terms of the essence of man, so that while being an animal is part of the essence of man, existence is not.

I began this chapter by arguing that an understanding of Suárez’s notion of possible being was necessary to complete our understanding of his notion of real being. This chapter has tried to resolve many of the complications embedded in Suárez’s notions of essence and existence with the ultimate purpose of rendering a correct interpretation of Suárez’s notion of possible being. I have concluded that for Suárez a possible being is a being that is “apt to exist.” I considered the difficulties surrounding Suárez’s notion of “apt to exist” and determined that the best interpretation is that anything that is non-selfcontradictory and that is within God’s power to create is “apt to exist.” I demonstrated that Suárez’s position that there exists only a mental distinction between essence and existence is not inconsistent with his maintaining that there are eternal truths. Finally, I demonstrated that Suárez’s view that eternal truths are necessary even

for God – meaning that they are independent of God’s efficacy and that God knows them because they are true and that they are not true because God knows them -- does not lessen God’s omnipotence or omniscience. Now let us turn to beings of reason themselves.