

Can We Know Substances? Suárez on a Sceptical Puzzle

by

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Abstract: It has often been said that the knowability of substances became a problem in the early modern period, when anti-Aristotelians doubted that we could know anything more than the sensory qualities that are present to us. This article argues that the late scholastic Aristotelian Francisco Suárez was already aware of this sceptical problem. On his view, substances are really (and not just modally) distinct from the perceivable qualities, and therefore cannot be known through sense perception. The article first examines the metaphysical theory that motivated him to defend this thesis. It then looks at the epistemological consequences he drew from it. Though he rejected direct knowledge of substances, he nevertheless conceded that knowledge can be obtained through a “discursive process”. The article explores this process, spelling out all the cognitive steps it involves. In particular, it analyses Suárez’s explanation of how we produce special cognitive devices (the “intelligible species”) that enable us to represent substances. Finally, it assesses Suárez’s solution to the knowability problem by comparing it to Locke’s solution. It argues that metaphysical rationalism led him to posit substances: we need to accept them as active causes and bearers of qualities, although we have no direct access to them.

Keywords: accident, Aristotelianism, discursive process, empiricism, intelligible species, Locke, metaphysical rationalism, mode, perception, quality, scepticism, Suárez, substance

1. Locke’s Problem and the Scholastic Background

FROM AN ARISTOTELIAN point of view, it is natural to suppose that the world is populated with many substances, and that we can know a large number of them. But *why* is it that we can know them? This is possible because we have sensory access to them; for instance, when I see a tree I come to know a substance, and when I smell a rose I come to know another substance. While unanimously accepting this seemingly simple thesis, scholastic Aristotelians disagreed widely about how we come to know substances. Starting with the assumption that knowledge of a substance requires the assimilation of its form, they developed various theories to explain the process of assimilation. Some appealed to special cognitive devices, the so-called “species”, which enable us to assimilate forms, while others argued that there can be direct, unmediated assimilation.¹ But no

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of this controversy, which dominated scholastic debates far into the sixteenth century, see Spruit (1995), Pasnau (1997), Perler (2002) and Adriaenssen (2017).

matter how much they disagreed about the process by which knowledge is acquired, they all subscribed to the thesis that we can, and in fact do, acquire knowledge of substances.

This changed in the early modern period, when anti-Aristotelians became more and more sceptical about our ability to detect substances. Locke is a famous example. On his view, our sensory access to things in the world does not provide us with knowledge of substances; strictly speaking, it provides knowledge only of bundles of qualities. When grasping one of these bundles, we assume that there is something underlying and supporting it, but this assumption is based upon mere imagination. As Locke critically remarks:

The *Idea* then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that Support *Substantia* ...²

Thus, when I see a tree, I grasp qualities such as colour, size and shape, and I assume that they are not free-floating entities. This leads me to posit some kind of support or hidden ground for them. But I have no direct evidence for this ground, since my evidence is restricted to the qualities I perceive. Locke mockingly remarks that someone positing a support for qualities is like an Indian who thinks that the world is supported by a giant elephant, and when asked what gives support to the elephant he replies that there must be a giant tortoise.³ Of course, one could press him and ask for an even more fundamental support, but no matter what he refers to, he will never have empirical evidence for that thing. He may argue that there must be some kind of support, because the world cannot exist without a foundation, but he will never know what that support is. Similarly, we can argue that there must be some kind of support for all the qualities we perceive, because they cannot exist by themselves. But we will never know what that thing is. Even in the case of our own soul, we are utterly unable to detect a substance that supports all our acts and states – no “inner elephant” can be grasped.

What made this critique possible? One could mention at least three anti-Aristotelian moves that paved the way for scepticism about our knowledge of substances. First of all, Locke rejected hylomorphism. He famously claimed that there are no such things as forms that are present in and combined with matter. If there are no form–matter compounds, which is what Aristotelians took substances to be, no knowledge of such compounds is possible. Second, Locke also rejected the idea that assimilation is what makes knowledge possible. On his view, between material things and human beings there are only relations of efficient causation. Consequently, there is no process of assimilation by which something could be transmitted

2 *Essay* II.xxiii.2 (Locke 1975, p. 296).

3 *Essay* II.xiii.19 and II.xxiii.2 (Locke, 1975, pp. 175 and 296); also I.iv.18 (Locke, 1975, p. 95).

to human beings and known by them. Third, Locke defended a strong form of empiricism. He unambiguously claimed that knowledge always requires experience, which first and foremost is sensory experience. But if there is sensory experience only of qualities, and not of substances, knowledge of substances is ruled out. Substances are simply things we postulate because we feel a need to indicate a foundation for all the qualities we experience.

Given these three moves, one could argue that scepticism about the knowability of substances was a typically anti-Aristotelian scepticism, motivated by theoretical shifts that occurred in the seventeenth century. It is tempting to argue in this way, and a number of commentators have in fact adopted this line of argument,⁴ but we would do better to resist the temptation. Sceptical tendencies started much earlier, and grew out of Aristotelian debates. Indeed, some late Aristotelians had serious doubts about our ability to acquire knowledge of substances. The question of how our sensory access to bundles of qualities can lead to knowledge of anything more than these bundles troubled scholastic authors, especially in the sixteenth century, and gave rise to controversies.

In what follows I want to look at these controversies by examining Suárez's position. Of course, he was not the first to deal with this epistemological problem. The knowability of substances was already an issue in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁵ Suárez followed in the footsteps of earlier scholastic authors, evaluating their solutions to this problem and presenting his own solution in close dialogue with them. But my aim is not to trace the history of the sceptical debate back to its roots or to reconstruct the links between thirteenth- and sixteenth-century authors. I rather intend to take a more systematic approach by examining how Suárez presented the knowability problem, how he rejected possible solutions to it, and how he defended his own solution. I will conclude by returning to Locke and comparing his account to Suárez's solution. I hope this will shed light on similarities as well as dissimilarities between these two authors and make clear that they reached different conclusions, despite their shared scepticism about our ability to have direct access to substances.

2. Knowing Substances through Modes

The starting point for all scholastic Aristotelians was the thesis that we cannot acquire knowledge of material substances unless we first perceive their sensible

4 In his influential study, Ayers opens the chapter on substance by first sketching the Aristotelian doctrine and then presenting Locke as a typical anti-Aristotelian who reacted against it; see Ayers (1991, vol. 2, pp. 18–30). For a more nuanced picture, see Stuart (2013, pp. 199–244).

5 See Noone (2011) for late thirteenth-century debates, Robert (2006) for fourteenth-century debates, and Pasnau (2011, pp. 115–134) for a general survey.

features. These are the so-called *sensibilia* or “sensibles”, which can be either proper (i.e., accessible to a single sense) or common (i.e., accessible to several senses). For instance, I cannot come to know a tree unless I see its colour, which is a proper sensible, and see or touch its shape, which is a common sensible. Metaphysically speaking, these features are accidents that fall into one of the nine accidental categories, primarily those of quality and quantity.

But what is a quality or a quantity? Some scholastic philosophers argued that it is not a distinct entity added to a substance, but a mere “mode” (*modus*); that is, it is a way of being of a substance.⁶ John of Mirecourt, a fourteenth-century author, is a good example. He held that the famous list of the ten Aristotelian categories should not be understood as a classification of ten types of entities or things. Strictly speaking, there is just one type of thing, namely substance, and every token of this type can be modified in different ways; hence there can be different modes of a substance. Mirecourt put it as follows:

In another way, an accident is taken (or can be taken) as the way in which something accidentally exists. For instance, we say that nakedness or poverty accidentally exists in someone – not because some entity exists accidentally in that person, but because the person exists in that way ...⁷

Thus, when we affirm that Peter is naked, we do not refer to a composite of two entities, namely, a substance and a quality. Rather, we are speaking about a single entity, a substance, which is structured or modified in a certain way. Using modern terminology, one could say that a predication like “Peter is naked” is to be understood adverbially, so that it means something like “Peter exists in a naked way” or “Peter exists nakedly”. The adverb simply expresses the way in which Peter exists right now; it does not refer to some entity over and above Peter himself. The same applies to statements about other accidents. When speaking about colours, shapes or smells, for example, we are simply expressing the way in which a given substance exists at a given moment.

This is a deflationary account of accidents, for it quantifies over nothing but substances and does not admit additional entities. It has the advantage that it provides an elegant solution to the problem of the knowability of substances. For if an accident is just a mode of a substance, it follows that when we perceive an accident that is present to us, we immediately perceive a substance and hence we immediately come to know a substance. Thus, when I see the naked

6 On the origins of this interpretation of the categories, see Pasnau (2011, pp. 244–252) and Normore (2014).

7 John of Mirecourt, *In primum librum Sententiarum*, q. 25, edited in Caroti (2004, p. 214): “Alio modo capitur accidens vel capi potest pro modo se habendi accidentaliter, sicut dicimus quod nuditas accidit isti vel paupertas, non quia aliqua entitas in hoc sibi accidat, sed quia sic se habet...” All translations are mine.

Peter, I immediately see him insofar as he exists in a naked way, and I thereby acquire knowledge of this particular substance. I do not need to make an additional step that leads me from knowing the accident to knowing the substance. According to Mirecourt, this is also true for knowledge of our own acts of thinking and willing, which are nothing but accidents of our soul.⁸ When knowing one of these acts, we immediately know the soul itself, because we grasp the way in which the soul is modified or structured at that moment. No additional step is required that leads us from knowing an act of the soul to knowing the soul itself.

This “mode theory”, as it might be called, was defended by a number of fourteenth-century authors (e.g., Nicole Oresme),⁹ and it was well known in the sixteenth century. Suárez is aware of it and agrees that we should not assume that the ten categories are ten types of entity. Like Mirecourt and other predecessors, he endorses the view that there are not just entities, but also modes. He makes this clear when he spells out different types of distinction, for he emphasizes that there is not just the standard type called “real distinction”, which is a relation between two entities, but also another type called “modal distinction”, which is a relation between an entity and a mode.¹⁰ To explain this second type of distinction Suárez adduces the example of inherence. When we speak about a quantity inhering in a substance, we should not assume that inherence is itself an entity or thing (say, a relational thing) that has its own existence and is somehow added to the quantity and the substance as a bridging entity. It is rather a mode, that is, a way of being of the quantity in the substance. Therefore, when we say that inherence differs from the quantity, we should not assume that it is really distinct from it.¹¹ Since it is nothing but a mode of the quantity, it is only modally distinct from it. This mode is certainly something real – that is, it is not something we make up and arbitrarily attribute to the quantity – but it is not an entity.

Now, the important point is that in making this claim Suárez is not defending a fully deflationary account of accidents. He claims that inherence is a mode, but he does not hold that the quantity having this mode is also just a mode. In fact,

8 See Caroti (2004, pp. 207–208).

9 In his *Questiones super Physicam* I, q. 5 (Oresme, 2013, pp. 36–39), Oresme explicitly rejects the view that accidents are entities added to substances.

10 See *Disputationes Metaphysicae* (Suárez, 1861b; hereafter *DM*) VII.1.16–20. (The first number refers to the disputation, the second to the section, the third to the paragraph.)

11 Positing an entity would give rise to a regress problem, as Suárez makes clear in *DM* VII.1.18. For if inherence were a special entity, we would have to explain how it can be anchored in both the substance and the quantity, and to do that we would have to introduce another bridging entity. For an analysis of this regress problem, see Perler ((2020b), pp. 162–163).

saying that the quantity inheres in a substance amounts to saying that there is an entity with a certain way of being. The existence of a mode does not rule out the existence of the accident as an entity; on the contrary, it requires that the accident be an entity. This emerges clearly in the following passage:

in the case of a quantity that is in a substance, one can consider two things. One is the entity of the quantity itself; the other is the quantity's union with, or actual inherence in, the substance. We call the first simply the "quantity thing", which includes whatever belongs to the essence of an individual quantity that occurs in reality. It remains in existence and is conserved even if the quantity is separated from the subject, and it is impossible to conserve the numerically identical thing, which is this quantity, without including the quantity's essence with its intrinsic individuation and actual being ...¹²

Clearly, there is the quantity as a thing, even as an individual or particular thing, which is different from the substance as another particular thing. These two items are really distinct things or entities. In addition, there is the inherence of the quantity in the substance, which is a mere mode. This is why only two and not three things need to be accepted here. But there is obviously more than one thing.¹³ The same is true for a quality, say, the colour of a tree. It is a thing that is really (and not just modally) distinct from the tree in which it inheres.¹⁴

But why should a quantity or a quality be an entity that is really distinct from a substance? Why can it not be reduced to a mode? Suárez adduces two main arguments to reject such a deflationary strategy. The first can be found in the passage just quoted, where he says that a quantity is something that has its own essence and that can exist even when it is separated from a substance. This could be called the "argument from independence": a quantity (and likewise a quality) has its own intrinsic features, and can therefore be defined without regard to its relation to a substance. It can even exist by itself, although it normally exists in a substance. It therefore has both essential and existential independence, and does not necessarily cease to exist when it is separated from a given substance. Indeed, God could intervene in the material world, take away the quantity or the quality that now exists in a given substance and somehow transport it to another substance, or even keep it in existence without attaching it to any substance.

12 *DM VII.1.17*: "in quantitate quae est in substantia, duo considerari possunt: unum est entitas ipsius quantitatis; aliud est unio seu actualis inhaerentia eiusdem quantitatis cum substantia. Primum vocamus simpliciter rem quantitatis, includentem quidquid est de essentia quantitatis individuae et in rerum natura positae, quod manet et conservatur etiamsi quantitas a subiecto separetur, et impossibile est conservari illam rem numero quae est haec quantitas, quin includat hanc essentiam quantitatis cum sua intrinseca individuatione et actuali esse."

13 Suárez clearly holds that quantity is not identical with or reducible to matter, one of the two constitutive parts of a substance. It is rather an entity added to matter. See *DM XL.2.11–9*, and the analysis in Schmaltz (2020, pp. 64–80).

14 On the status of qualities, see *DM XLII.1.5–8*. For an analysis of different types of quality and their relation to substance, see Des Chene (1996, pp. 109–121).

The second argument, which Suárez develops in the disputation dealing with the general definition of accidents, could be called the “argument from change”: when a thing changes in quality, it really acquires or loses something.¹⁵ Suppose, for example, that someone painted a green tree red. The tree would then lose a quality and at the same time acquire a new one. There could be no such change, Suárez claims, without the exchange of an entity. Of course, there could also be other changes that only involve an alteration of a given quality; for instance, in spring the colour of the tree could at first be light green and then become more intense until it is dark green. Like many other scholastic authors, Suárez considers this kind of change to be an intensification of a given quality.¹⁶ It does not require the acquisition of a new quality, but only the expansion, and hence alteration, of an already existing one. However, Suárez insists that there can also be a more radical type of change, namely, the acquisition of a new quality that a thing did not have before, not even to a very small degree. This is exactly the case when the green colour is completely replaced with a new colour. This kind of change, which goes beyond a mere intensification, cannot occur unless a given quality is replaced with a new quality.

Given these two arguments, it is clear why Suárez thinks that it is necessary to accept quantities and qualities as entities in their own right. To be sure, this does not mean that all nine types of accident ought to be accepted as nine types of entity. One of the main confusions in the whole debate about the categories arises from the fact that we do not clearly distinguish between accidents that are in fact entities and accidents that are mere modes. It is precisely this distinction that Suárez emphasizes. For instance, he points out that being curved or having a certain shape is not an entity in addition to a given quantity; it is rather a mode of a quantity, that is, a certain way in which a quantity is present in a substance.¹⁷ We should therefore not multiply entities without necessity. Whenever we are asked to give an account of a certain accident, we should carefully evaluate whether it is really an entity that has its own essence and that cannot be reduced to another entity, or just a mode of a given entity. If we proceed in this way, we will eventually realize that only some types of accident, namely qualities and quantities, are fundamental: they cannot be reduced to mere modes.

This has an immediate consequence for the knowability problem. If a given accident is a real entity, and is thus really (and not just modally) distinct from a substance, then it is just this accident that we come to know when we have a

15 See *DM* XXXII.1.4.

16 Technically speaking, it is an “intension of a form” (*intensio formae*); see *DM* XLVI.1.35–40. On this type of change, see the classic study by Maier (1968).

17 See *DM* VII.1.19, and the detailed analysis in Menn (1997).

perception. Therefore, when I see a green tree in front of me, I come to know only the colour green, which is a particular entity, but not the tree itself, which is a different entity. I might suppose that there must be something underlying the colour, and I might even assume that this must be a substance in which the colour inheres, but this is mere speculation. All I can know on the basis of my sensory experience is the colour that is present to me.

To be sure, one could argue that it is not just the “naked” colour that is present to me. I never see just a patch of green; I rather see something that is green. Therefore, I spontaneously think that there is a green thing in front of me, without making any speculation about substance and inherence. It would be quite wrong to assume that I commit myself to a sophisticated theory when I think that there is in fact a green thing. I *naturally* see a green thing and thereby *naturally* acquire knowledge of that thing.¹⁸

Suárez would certainly agree with this kind of description of the perceptual process. Nevertheless, he would insist that we need to distinguish between what we really see, that is, what object is really present to us, and what we believe we see in a given situation. Since we tend to locate the object in a whole network of objects, we naturally take it to be linked to (or even inhering in) some other object. And we naturally come up with a judgement like “There is a green tree” and not just “There is a patch of green”. There is nothing wrong with this judgement as long as we are aware of the fact that it is the product of a natural assumption we make. But it would be misleading to equate a mere assumption with knowledge. If we confine ourselves to making knowledge claims about what is *immediately* present to us, we need to concede that we have knowledge just of a colour, not of an underlying thing that is really distinct from it.

3. Knowing Substances through Necessary Connections

It is quite evident that metaphysical and epistemological issues are closely connected here. Suárez’s metaphysical thesis that qualities and quantities are entities, not just modes, inevitably raises the epistemological problem of how something beyond these immediately accessible entities can be known. At first sight, there seems to be a simple solution to this problem. A quality or a quantity, one could say, is an entity that has its own essence and existence. But in the natural world it always exists in a substance, and in fact naturally inheres in a substance. One could even say that it *necessarily* inheres in a substance, since it is a dependent

18 This is how Strawson (2011, p. 130) famously argued when defending the claim that we always need to include the reference to a perceptual frame. That is, we need to refer to a broader frame in which there are things with colours and not just colours as atomistic objects.

entity that needs to be grounded in an independent entity. There can be no such thing as, say, a free-floating colour; rather, whenever a particular colour exists, there must be a substance in which it exists. And although we cannot perceive the substance directly, we can grasp it indirectly, namely, as that to which the colour is attached. In short, we always have access to the whole package consisting of an accident (or a multitude of accidents) and a substance, even if it is only the accident (or accidents) that we immediately perceive.

This is a position Suárez knows very well. He attributes it to the Thomists of his time and to Chrysostomus Javellus, an early sixteenth-century author.¹⁹ Indeed, Javellus points out in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics* that when we know an accident we always come to know a substance, because the two are naturally and even necessarily connected. We could not make sense of an accident if we did not understand that it is present in a substance. This observation leads Javellus to the following conclusion:

the definition of accident presupposes the definition of substance. Therefore, the concept of an accident necessarily presupposes the concept of a substance in our intellect.²⁰

This means that we cannot conceive of an accident like colour without also conceiving of a substance in which it inheres. This is why we conceive of the whole package, thereby acquiring knowledge of the substance along with the accident.

Appealing as this position might seem, Suárez rejects it. Why? He has no doubt that we usually establish a connection between accident and substance, but he stresses that this does not lead to knowledge of a particular substance. All it leads to is the knowledge that there must be some substance in which the accident inheres, but we cannot tell in which substance it actually does inhere. We can even go wrong when we assume that there must be a certain substance that comes, as it were, in a package with a perceivable accident. Suárez illustrates this point with the famous case of the Eucharist:

Both conclusions [namely, that we know accidents through perception and that we do not know substances through perception] are confirmed by the mystery of the sacrament of the Eucharist, for in that case the accidents of bread are perceived in the same way as other sensible things. And in the case of other things the subject of the accidents is not more perceived than here. But on the basis of a phantasm of the consecrated bread, there is not produced in the intellect any proper

19 See *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 4 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 164), where Javellus is mentioned as an author who even claims that we first know the substance and then the accident, because we cannot know a dependent entity unless we first know the independent entity in which it exists.

20 Javellus (1555), *In omnibus Metaphysicae libris quaesita* VII, q. 3, 158v: “diffinitio accidentis supponit diffinitionem substantiae, ergo necesse est conceptum accidentis supponere in intellectu nostro conceptum substantiae.”

species of the substance of bread nor any proper concept of it, because in fact there is no such substance. Therefore, in the case of other sensible things, one neither acquires a species nor produces such a concept. Otherwise the intellect could judge whether or not there is a substance under the accidents.²¹

Obviously, it is not for theological reasons that the example of the Eucharist is mentioned here. Suárez uses it for methodological reasons in order to make an epistemological point. In fact, he uses it as an analytical tool: it enables him to analyse the entities that can be known, and in fact are known, in the case of sense perception.²² In the special case of the consecrated bread, an act of transubstantiation has occurred and the substance of bread has been replaced with the substance of the body of Christ, although all the accidental features of bread remain; therefore, we can get no concept of the substance of bread (nor any knowledge of it) through the mere perception of its accidents, because there is no bread. Thus, merely seeing a certain colour and shape does not provide knowledge of a particular substance. If this is true for the special case of the Eucharist, it must also be true for normal cases, for the epistemic condition is the same. When I see a piece of bread in daily life, I only perceive a certain colour and shape, but not the bread itself. I might spontaneously think that there must be a bread substance underlying the accidents I perceive, but this is nothing more than an assumption that could be mistaken – there is no bread substance that shines through the accidents.

Suárez is making a subtle point here. Even if we grant that we cannot conceive of an accident without conceiving of it as attached to a substance, as Javellus rightly pointed out, we are utterly unable to gain knowledge of a particular substance. For when we perceive a bundle of accidents, we can only say that they must be in *some* substance since they are dependent entities, but we can never know for sure what that substance is. The main reason for this lack of knowledge lies in the fact that there is no necessary connection between a bundle of

21 *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 4, n. 5 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, pp. 158–160): “Et confirmatur utraque conclusio ex mysterio sacramenti Eucharistiae, nam ibi eodem modo sentiuntur accidentia panis quo aliae res sensibiles; et in aliis rebus non magis sentitur subiectum accidentium quam ibi; sed ibi ex phantasmate panis consecrati non producitur in intellectu species propria substantiae panis nec proprius illius conceptus, quia ibi vere non est talis substantia, ergo neque in aliis rebus sensibilibus acquiritur illa species vel formatur talis conceptus, alias posset intellectus diiudicare an sub his accidentibus esset substantia necne.”

22 I borrow the expression “analytical tool” from Courtenay (1985, p. 243), who rightly remarks that medieval authors used theories of divine omnipotence to distinguish possible things and states of affairs from impossible ones. Their aim was not to characterize God as a capricious tyrant who intervenes in the world and destroys the natural order. What God can do with his absolute power shows rather what is *metaphysically* and not just naturally possible.

accidents and a particular substance. There is only a contingent connection – a connection that could always be broken and changed by God. Hence we can only make guesses about the substance that serves as the foundation for a given bundle of accidents, but we cannot go beyond this weak epistemic state.

The case of the Eucharist also illustrates a problem that goes even deeper. In the normal course of nature, accidents like colour and shape inhere in a substance. But when transubstantiation occurs, God changes the way they exist. In particular, he changes the way quantity exists, and makes it such that it no longer inheres in a substance. Technically speaking, he deprives it of its inherence and hence of its “mode of union” with the underlying substance.²³ This means that the quantity of the bread is still *present* in a substance, but it no longer *inheres* in it. It is, as it were, only loosely attached to the new substance. This is why the new substance (i.e., Christ’s body) does not really have the quantity of bread; it merely coexists with it. It is therefore incorrect to say that a quantity is necessarily a dependent entity that inheres in a substance, for it can also be a kind of free-standing entity that only cohabites with a substance. Unfortunately, perception does not tell us whether there is real inherence or mere cohabitation. It could always be, as the case of the Eucharist shows, that it only looks as if a quantity were inhering in a substance without there actually being such a close relation. How then can we ever know that there really is a substance and that a given quantity really inheres in it?

Now, Suárez seems to be in serious trouble. His commitment to the thesis that qualities and quantities are distinct entities and not just modes forces him to admit that there can be no *direct* knowledge of substances. And his commitment to the thesis that these entities are only contingently and not necessarily related to substances (sometimes even without inhering in them) forces him to admit that there can be no *indirect* knowledge either. How then can we ever acquire knowledge of substances?

4. Discursive Knowledge of Substances

Suárez is fully aware that he faces a serious epistemological problem. But he does not draw the pessimistic conclusion that we are utterly unable to acquire knowledge of substances. He rather defends the optimistic view that such knowledge is possible. However, he emphasizes that we can acquire it only by means of a

23 *De sacramento eucharistiae*, disp. 77, art. 2 (Suárez, 1861a, *Opera omnia*, vol. 21, p. 280): “Dico primo, quantitatem separatam privari positivo, reali et intrinseco modo, quem in subjecto habebat, qui appellatur actualis inhaerentia seu modus unionis.” Suárez here invokes a model that makes quantity a quasi-substance that can exist on its own and that serves as the bearer of other accidents. For the origin of this theory in thirteenth-century debates, see Adams (2010, pp. 179–196).

complex cognitive process, which he spells out by distinguishing a series of steps. It is important to examine each step in order to understand how the acquisition of knowledge is supposed to work.

At the beginning of the cognitive process, we only perceive accidents and form inner devices that represent them. These are first purely sensory devices, the “phantasms”, and then intellectual devices, the “intelligible species”.²⁴ In making this claim Suárez does not assume that we acquire intelligible species through a process of abstraction. Unlike Thomas Aquinas and later Thomists (e.g., Cajetan), he does not believe that we can abstract or somehow extract the essence of a thing from a given phantasm, and then represent it with an intelligible species.²⁵ Why not? The reason is that we simply do not know *what* we should abstract. All that is given to us in a phantasm is a bundle of various features, and in the initial stage of the cognitive process we cannot distinguish between the accidental and the essential features.

Let me illustrate this point with an example. Suppose that I am in a meadow and I see a goat. What exactly do I see? Nothing but a certain colour, shape and size; perhaps I also perceive a smell, and maybe I am standing close enough to the goat that I can touch it and feel the way it breathes. So I have access to a number of visual, olfactory and tactile features. When I combine them, I come up with a complex sensory representation of the goat. This representation, called a phantasm, includes all the features I have just perceived. But I cannot draw a line between the accidental and the essential features simply by having this representation. For how can I know that being white is accidental to the goat, while breathing is essential? The mere perception gives me no criterion for making this distinction. Hence I cannot represent the goat as an animal that is essentially a mammal or that essentially has a respiratory system. Generally speaking, on the basis of a single phantasm, we cannot form an intellectual representation that differs in its content from the phantasm. The intelligible species is nothing but a dematerialized version of the sensory phantasm, and so it deals with the very same bundle of features as the phantasm. It simply represents them in a different way, namely, in a “spiritual way”, which is purely immaterial.²⁶ This means for the

24 See *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 2 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, pp. 94–106). For an analysis of the formation of these devices, see Spruit (1995, pp. 294–307) and South (2001).

25 See *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 2, n. 17 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, pp. 104–106), and an analysis of his critique in Perler (2020a). It is of course questionable whether his critique really hits the target. For a sophisticated reconstruction of Aquinas’s position that does not invoke a mysterious process of abstraction, see Cory (2015).

26 *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 2, n. 17 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 104): “Dicitur ergo quod species abstrahi, quia intellectus agens virtute sua efficit quamdam speciem spiritualem repraesentantem eandem naturam quam phantasma repraesentat, non tamen materialiter, sicut phantasma repraesentat, sed quodam spirituali modo; et illa elevatio a materiali repraesentatione phantasmatis ad spiritualem repraesentationem intelligibilis specie dicitur abstractio.” See also disp. 9, q. 4, n. 2 (vol. 3, p. 154).

example of the goat that if I want to find out what its essential features are, I need to do much more work; for instance, I need to observe the goat over a long period of time in order to see which features come and go and which ones persist. I also need to compare the goat to other animals, say, to sheep and dogs, in order to see what is special about it. Only then will I eventually be able to describe its essential features. This is a time-consuming process, and it requires more than mere observation. I may need to do detailed anatomical studies, and perhaps consult biologists and veterinarians. In any case, finding out what are the essential features and distinguishing them from the accidental ones is a difficult task.

This is an important thesis that shows the extent to which Suárez is critical of the traditional (mostly Thomistic) theory that establishes a close connection between producing an intelligible species and abstracting the essence of a thing.²⁷ He emphasizes that we need to distinguish these two cognitive steps. Forming an intelligible species amounts to simply dematerializing a phantasm, whereas abstracting the essence amounts to examining a thing and comparing it to other things so that its distinctive features become clear. In short, it amounts to analysing a thing. This takes much more time than the mere production of an initial intelligible species.

I hope it has become clear so far that at least three steps are to be made in the cognitive process. First, we need to form a phantasm, which is a sensory, and hence material, representation of a bundle of features. Second, we need to produce an intelligible species, which is an immaterial representation of the same bundle. And third, we need to go through a long process of examination, which leads us to produce another representation, one that is about just the essential features.²⁸ To get this last representation we also need an intelligible species, because every representation requires a cognitive device. But this second intelligible species clearly differs from the first: it has its own content and is applicable to many tokens of the same type of thing.

So far, so good. Do we now possess a representation of a substance? No, because we are still at the level of particular features. We have sorted out the features that are present to us, but we have not yet reached the deeper level of the

27 Aquinas famously claimed that the intellect can abstract the essence of a thing on the basis of a single phantasm. He even affirmed that the intellect cannot go wrong when apprehending the essence; see *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 85, art. 6 (Aquinas, 1952, p. 423). However, Aquinas would also have agreed that one cannot grasp the full essence at once, since the initial species may be vague and may therefore not provide a full representation of the essence. For a careful interpretation along this line, see Kretzmann (1991).

28 Since the essence can be found in many things of the same type, we come to form a universal representation; see *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 2, n. 13 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, pp. 126–128).

substance that has all these features. To arrive at this level, we need to make still another step. Suárez describes it as follows:

but the subject of the accidents (as well as other things that are not represented by the species) is assembled by the intellect through a discursive process. For when the intellect sees accidents, and especially when it becomes aware of their change, which occurs with respect to the same subject, it assembles through a discursive process something that lies under them. And it is in this way that it conceives of a substance as an underlying subject.²⁹

This is a remarkable statement. Suárez holds that we need to go through a “discursive process” (*discursus*) to reach the conception of a substance and eventually also the knowledge of it.³⁰ But what does this process amount to? Suárez is not very explicit, but his short remark about the problem of change shows that he invokes a process of reasoning that is based on a metaphysical assumption. When we realize that many features come and go while something remains in place, we start thinking that there must be a bearer for all the features we perceive – a bearer that persists over time. Although we cannot observe it, we must accept its existence; otherwise we could not give a plausible account of the fact that something remains stable while many features change. This bearer is the underlying substance. To make it cognitively present, we need a special intelligible species, namely, one that somehow picks out the bearer and leaves aside all the changing features.

If this species were based just on a process of reasoning, it would be a mere product of our intellect and hence something that lacks an empirical basis. But as an empiricist, Suárez cannot accept such a thing. On his view, every representing species must have a foundation in experience. He therefore emphasizes that the mind does not simply create the species representing a substance out of nothing, nor does it actualize an innate species.³¹ Rather, it collects or “assembles” (*colligit*) it on the basis of sensory experience, as Suárez holds in the passage just quoted. What does this mean? Let me return to the goat example to make sense of this statement. Suppose that I see the goat’s colour and size. In that case I do not simply perceive a “naked” colour and an equally “naked” size; rather, I perceive these features insofar as they are present in the goat. And when I combine them in order to produce a sensory image, I do not simply form an image representing a bundle of features; rather, I produce an image of a thing that has these

29 *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 4, n. 6 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 160): “at vero subiectum accidentium – et alia, quae per speciem non repraesentantur – discursu colligitur ab intellectu, nam videns intellectus accidentia, et praecipue cognoscens transmutationem eorum – quae fit circa idem subiectum – discursu colligit aliquid substare illis. Et sic concipit substantiam per modum subiecti substantis.”

30 He uses the same terminology in *DM XXXVIII.2.12*, where he says that we reach knowledge of a substance “post longum discursum et reflexionem”.

31 Suárez explicitly rules out innatism in *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 2, n. 2 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 80).

features. The thing comes, as it were, along with the features that are present to me. Of course, it is mixed up with all the features. This is why I have to go through a process of reasoning and ask myself what underlies all those features. Metaphorically speaking, I have to uncover the underlying thing. But when doing so, I do not invent or create anything. I simply uncover something that has been present to me right from the beginning. And when I then represent it by means of a species, I produce a cognitive device that picks out an element that has been included in all my perceptions. Or to put it in Suárez's terms, I assemble what has been common to all of them.

Suárez spells this point out by comparing the representation of a substance to the representation of a universal.³² When we represent something universal – say, the fact that every goat is an animal – we do not invent or create anything. Rather, we focus on something that is present in every goat and somehow isolate it from all the individual features. That is, we represent something that can be found in each and every goat.³³ Similarly, when we represent a substance, we focus on something that is present in every goat, and we identify it as the bearer of all the accidental features and somehow isolate it from them. Of course, we need to do some work to reach this point. We need to realize that many accidental features change while the underlying bearer remains the same. This is why a “discursive process” is required. But this process does not aim at inventing a thing and at attributing it to what is present to us in a sensory experience. Its goal is to uncover something that has been present to us right from the beginning and to represent it by means of a distinctive species.

We have now made an additional step in the cognitive process, for we have not just come up with two species for two different bundles of features, but have also produced a third species that represents distinctly the previously hidden bearer of the accidental features.³⁴ This last step in the cognitive process is quite demanding, since it is based on a metaphysical principle that is not self-evident, namely, the principle that every change requires a persisting subject. It is only by invoking this principle that we can distinguish between a change in a given thing and the generation of a completely new thing. Presumably, small children are not yet able to make this distinction; consequently, they cannot come up with a species that

32 See *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 4, n. 7 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 162).

33 Suárez discusses the formation of a universal concept at length in *DM* V and VI. For a detailed analysis, see Heider (2014).

34 Suárez explicitly holds that we need a special species to represent the substance; see *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 4, n. 7 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 162). Note that he calls the substance the subject of just the accidental features (see n. 29). Why is it not the subject of the essential features? Suárez provides no explanation, but he would presumably say that the essential features are inner features of the substance. It is precisely because of these features that the substance can serve as the subject for a given set of accidental features.

represents an underlying substance. It takes some time to learn that every change presupposes something that persists. Using modern terminology, one could say that knowledge of a substance, which an adult person eventually acquires, is theory-laden: it requires insight into a metaphysical principle and its application to a given situation.

It should be noted that this knowledge is not simply knowledge of substance in general. Rather, it is knowledge of a specific substance that serves as the subject of a specific bundle of accidental features. Ideally, it is even knowledge of a *particular* substance, for it enables us to characterize a given substance in detail. In the case of the goat that is standing in front of me, it enables me to characterize the substance that underlies a very special colour, size and movement. This substance clearly differs from the substances that underlie the accidental features of other animals. Suárez is explicit about this point. He stresses that everyone who has the right understanding of accidental features realizes that they cannot be free-floating things, but must be present in a substance. But what such a person understands is only that they must be present in *some* substance, not that they must be in *this* particular substance. Therefore, she has an understanding of an underlying subject only “in a confused way” (*in confuso*), not “in a concrete way” (*in concreto*).³⁵ To arrive at a precise and proper understanding of a given substance one needs to go through a detailed discursive process. This is exactly what Javellus failed to see. He thought that a general understanding of the metaphysical dependence relation between accident and substance would immediately lead to the understanding of a particular substance. But this is clearly wrong. It takes quite an effort to characterize the substance that underlies a given set of accidental features.³⁶

In light of this time-consuming process, it becomes clear that the discursive knowledge of a substance is closely connected with detailed knowledge of all the accidental features that are present. In fact, it presupposes it, as much as it presupposes the grasp of a metaphysical principle. For we cannot say anything illuminating about a particular substance unless we are able to describe a rich bundle of features. For instance, I cannot say anything informative about the goat substance unless I first come to know features like being white, having soft fur, bleating, etc., because only then can I affirm that the goat substance is the subject

35 See *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 4, n. 6 and n. 8 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, pp. 160 and 166).

36 It is therefore important to distinguish clearly between these two types of understanding or cognition, as Suárez explains in *DM XXXVIII.2.7*. The first type is simply “definitional cognition” (*cognitio definitiva*). In understanding the definition of a substance as an underlying thing we come to know that every accident must be grounded in *some* substance. The second type is “referring cognition” (*cognitio demonstrativa*). In grasping a specific bundle of accidents, we can refer to *this* substance and pick it out as a special thing.

underlying this specific bundle of features. In fact, only then can I characterize the substance as the relevant cause that makes these features possible. This means, of course, that Suárez does not endorse a view that is nowadays called the “bare particular view”.³⁷ A substance is not a completely undetermined and, as it were, naked subject of all the features we can observe. On the contrary, it is a very rich, fully determined subject that has the causal power to bring about a specific bundle of features. Each and every substance has its own power. This is why there is a difference not only between different species of substances, but also between two substances belonging to the same species. We need to spell out for each and every substance which features it makes possible. Only then can we characterize it adequately; or as Suárez says, only then can we have “quidditative knowledge” of it, that is, the kind of knowledge that tells us exactly what the inner nature, and hence the causal power, of this substance is.³⁸

This applies not just to knowledge of material substances, but also to knowledge of other things that are not immediately present. Suárez affirms:

we know a substance in its essence in a human way, namely a posteriori and through its effects. In this way we know matter, our soul, etc., but we never conceive of these things by means of proper and absolute concepts.³⁹

We have no proper and absolute concept of a substance, because there is no way of characterizing it in itself and completely “detached” (*absolutus*) from all its features. Whenever we want to describe it as *this* substance with *this* special nature, we need to bring in all its features. Only then will we be able to describe it as a specific substance that underlies a specific bundle of features and makes those features possible in the first place. Generally speaking, we can only give a relational account of a substance, that is, by characterizing it in relation to its specific features.

As the passage just quoted makes clear, Suárez thinks that this is also true for our own soul. He rejects an introspectionist account according to which we can somehow contemplate our soul and grasp it as a particular thing that is immediately present to us.⁴⁰ All we can immediately grasp are our mental states or acts, which stand in the same relation to the soul as perceptible features stand to a material thing – that is, they are effects of a certain cause. For instance, I can grasp only my acts of perceiving, imagining and thinking, which occur at a given

37 See Loux and Crisp (2017, ch. 3) and Sider (2006).

38 See *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 4, n. 8 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 164).

39 *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 4, n. 8 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 166): “substantia cognoscitur a nobis quidditative modo humano, scilicet a posteriori et per effectus; et hoc modo cognoscimus materiam, animam nostram, etc. nusquam tamen concipimus has res propriis et absolutis conceptibus.”

40 See *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 5, n. 2 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 170).

moment, and I can then search for the cause of all these acts. Moreover, I can ask why there is something that remains constant despite the fact that my acts come and go. To answer this question, I need to apply the same metaphysical principle that I also apply to material things. That is, I need to realize that there can be no change unless there is something that persists. When I do so, I arrive at the conclusion that there must be an underlying substance which brings about all the acts and remains stable over time. It is through this kind of discursive reasoning that I come to know my soul as a substance.

Three points are notable about this account. First, there is obviously no asymmetry between knowing material things and knowing one's own soul. In neither case do we have direct access to a substance. Admittedly, there is an asymmetry with regard to access to the special features of a substance. In the case of a material substance, our access to its features is mediated by phantasms and intelligible species, whereas in the case of our own soul, our access to its acts and states is *not* mediated. We have immediate awareness of the acts and states of our own soul – no special devices are required.⁴¹ In both cases, however, we need to make a special cognitive step to get from the perceivable features or acts to the underlying substance. Suárez would therefore reject the famous Cartesian “cogito argument”, according to which I can affirm immediately and with certainty that I exist when I apprehend an act of thinking: apprehending an act is one thing, knowing the underlying substance is quite another. It is at this point that the consequence of Suárez's rejection of the mode theory becomes apparent.⁴² If act and substance are two really distinct entities, then one does not come to know one's own substance by knowing an act of thinking. Rather, one needs to go through a discursive process that eventually leads from knowledge of an act to knowledge of the underlying substance.

Second, it is quite remarkable that Suárez does not appeal to complete or even infallible knowledge of our own soul. Just as we can be wrong when we characterize material substances, we can also be mistaken when we characterize our own soul, simply because we might give an incomplete or even a misleading account when we describe what underlies our mental acts. It is quite telling that

41 Suárez concedes that we can reflect upon our own acts and produce intelligible species that represent them; see *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 5, nn. 3–4 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, pp. 170–172). But in the case of perceptual acts, he insists that we have a basic form of awareness: we are aware of them simply in having them. For an analysis, see Perler (2014).

42 Descartes's metaphysical assumptions become equally apparent. It is precisely because he adopts the mode theory that he can claim that no additional step is required in order to know the underlying substance: knowing an act amounts to knowing the substance that is modified in a certain way. On Descartes's commitment to the mode theory, see *Principia Philosophiae* 1.56 and 1.61 (Descartes, 1982, vol. VIII-1, pp. 26 and 29–30).

Suárez speaks only about discursive knowledge, but not about intuitive knowledge. Discursive knowledge is always fallible. It starts with a description of the acts that are immediately present, and this description can be expanded or eventually corrected.⁴³ Moreover, we can never be absolutely certain about the substance underlying all the acts. As became clear in section 3, it is always possible for God to exchange the substance while keeping all of its accidents. Even in the case of our own soul, God could intervene and replace it with another substance. Hence we can only have *conditional* certainty about its existence. All we can say is the following: if God does not intervene in the natural order, then the substance underlying our acts must be of such a nature that it has the causal power to bring about this set of acts.

Third, from a methodological point of view it is remarkable that Suárez does not start with the knowledge of our own soul in order to have a model for understanding the knowledge of material substances. Instead, he proceeds in the reverse order: he takes knowledge of material substances as his starting point and then moves on to knowledge of our own soul.⁴⁴ On his view, it is the case of *external* things that shows us how we can have knowledge of substances and what constraints there are when we acquire it step by step. In short, he moves from the outside to the inside – there is no privileged access to our own soul.

To be sure, when defending the thesis that there are in fact substances and that each substance must have a substantial form as an active principle, Suárez refers to the soul as the paradigmatic case: it is in apprehending our own soul that we realize what a substantial form is.⁴⁵ But this does not mean that we always need to turn to our own soul and that we cannot know other substances unless we first apprehend this special substance. Apprehending our own soul makes it only possible to better understand the inner functioning of a substance. But it is not required for having access to other substances. On the contrary, we first have access to other substances by perceiving a multitude of accidents that must have an underlying subject; after all, sense perception reveals accidents of material substances, not of our own soul. When we then start asking what a substance is and how it can become active, we turn to our own soul, because it is in this case that we cannot fail to see that inner activity is a crucial feature of substance. So, moving from the outside

43 The knowledge we have of our own soul therefore crucially differs from the knowledge an angel has; see *De anima*, disp. 9, q. 5, n. 2 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 3, p. 170). An angel fully contemplates its own soul and thereby gains full knowledge of it, whereas we have to build up our knowledge by characterizing step by step the substance that makes a certain set of experienced acts possible.

44 He thereby distances himself from an Augustinian tradition that took self-knowledge to be fundamental and follows instead an Aristotelian tradition that takes the knowledge of external things to be fundamental. On the tension between these two traditions, see Perler (2017).

45 See *DM* XV.1.6, where Suárez argues that it is with respect to our own soul that we realize that a substantial form is an “intrinsic cause”. It is for this reason that he spells out his theory of substantial form by focusing on the human soul. For detailed analysis, see Hattab (2009, pp. 42–53).

to the inside is quite important. Nevertheless, we need to start with *external* things because these things are present to us in sense perception, and it is with these things that we realize how we can have epistemic access to substances.

5. Conclusion

Where does this leave us? I began by pointing out that Locke was highly sceptical of our knowledge of substances. He thought that we simply postulate a subject that underlies all the qualities we perceive – a subject we call “substance” but for which we have no direct evidence. It seems at first sight that Suárez comes to the same conclusion. Like Locke, he thinks that we perceive only sensible features, and like Locke he claims that it is only through a process of reasoning that we come to the conclusion that there must be a substance underlying them. Of course, Suárez differs from Locke in his conception of the features we perceive. He takes them to be accidental features that can be classified according to the Aristotelian list of categories. Locke rejects this list and claims that the features we perceive are simply primary and secondary qualities. But despite this difference in their metaphysical commitments, they seem to be quite close in their epistemological positions, inasmuch as they both agree that we have no direct access to substances and hence no direct knowledge of them.

However, if we look more closely at their positions, we can see a crucial difference. The conclusion Locke draws is rather pessimistic: since we have no experience of substances, our knowledge of them is very weak – it is based on mere assumption.⁴⁶ Or to be more precise, we can at best know *that* there are some substances since all the qualities we perceive need a foundation, but we can never know *what* these substances are. What we claim to know are simply things we assume to exist, but which are as speculative as the great elephant or the tortoise that an Indian takes to be the substance underlying the whole world. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Locke is completely agnostic about our own soul, which is supposed to be the substance underlying our acts and states. On his view, we simply cannot know what it is. We cannot even characterize it as something material or immaterial.⁴⁷ Our soul is inaccessible to us, and therefore we cannot describe it. All we can do is make guesses about its metaphysical constitution. In contrast, Suárez reaches a more optimistic conclusion. He does not

46 He clearly states (see n. 2) that substances are only “supposed” to exist. Of course, he concedes that we form ideas of substances. But these ideas “are nothing else but a Collection of a certain number of simple Ideas, considered as united in one thing” (*Essay* II.xxiii.14; Locke, 1975, p. 305). We have neither ideas of sensation nor ideas of reflection of substances and therefore lack a solid ground for knowledge.

47 See *Essay* IV.iii.6 (Locke, 1975, pp. 541–542). On Locke’s reasons for being agnostic about the soul’s materiality or immateriality, see Jolley (2015, pp. 50–66).

hesitate to affirm that the substance we come to know in the final step of our cognitive process is an entity that really exists and that can be described on solid grounds, even though we lack direct access to it.

Given this difference, it would be too hasty to claim that there is a smooth transition from a Suárezian to a Lockean scepticism. Suárez is clearly not a sceptic about our knowledge of substances. On his view, while our discursive knowledge of substances may be incomplete and fallible, it is nevertheless real knowledge that gives us insight into something that really exists. Not only do we know *that* substances exist, but in many cases we can also know *what* they are, that is, what their specific nature is. In the case of our own soul, Suárez is convinced that if we carefully examine the foundation of all our acts and states we can come to know what the soul is – namely, an immaterial and immortal substance, which differs from all other substances.⁴⁸

Why does Suárez draw a more optimistic conclusion than Locke? It is tempting to answer this question by mentioning the three fundamental commitments introduced in section 1: hylomorphism, assimilationism and empiricism. Yet a closer look at these commitments reveals that they cannot be the main reason for the difference between Suárez and Locke. First of all, Suárez does not invoke the theory of forms when he claims that we can know substances. As has become clear, he defends the thesis that there must be a bearer or subject for all the changing features we perceive; thus, when arguing that we can know substances he appeals to the subject theory of substance, not to the form theory. Second, he does not bring in assimilationism. On the contrary, he repeatedly points out that we need inner cognitive devices to acquire knowledge, and he does not hesitate to call these devices representations. All the intelligible species that are produced in the cognitive process are inner representations of external things. Suárez is thus much closer to Locke in his general account of cognition than to a traditional Aristotelian, who would deny the existence of inner representations.⁴⁹ Third, Suárez is as much an empiricist as Locke in his epistemological programme. He clearly rejects innate representations, holding that our entire body of knowledge must be based on sense perception.⁵⁰ In fact, like Locke he takes the human mind to be a blank slate that needs to be filled with the information we get by sense perception.

48 He even thinks that we can prove that it is immortal; see *De anima*, disp. 2, q. 3 (Suárez, 1978–91, vol. 1, pp. 162–248). For a reconstruction of his proofs, see South (2012).

49 In fact, one can see Suárez as a late scholastic philosopher who paved the way for early modern representationalism, for he sets intelligible species as inner representations apart from external things. Unlike traditional Aristotelians, he does not speak about an identity between the form in the perceiver and the form in the perceived thing. On this anti-Aristotelian move, see Perler (2020a).

50 As has already been pointed out (see n. 31), Suárez openly criticizes Platonic innatism.

But if these three issues play no decisive role here, why then do Suárez and Locke differ in their conclusions? It seems to me that we can identify at least three reasons.⁵¹ The first has to do with the problem of change discussed in section 4. For Suárez, it is of crucial importance to explain why there can be things that persist over time, including our own soul, while their perceptible features constantly change. A satisfactory explanation must refer to a stable ground: there must be something in the world that does *not* change and that serves as the foundation for all the changing features. If we did not accept such a foundation, we could not explain the difference between a mere change in a thing and the generation of a new thing. Even worse, we would have a fragmented picture of the world – a picture in which there is nothing more than constantly changing bundles of features. Of course, Locke does not accept a fragmented picture either; he too maintains that there are stable things that persist over time. This is why he accepts the thesis that there are substances. But he refrains from spelling out what they are, and this is exactly the weak point Suárez would criticize. If we introduce substances as completely obscure things of which we say nothing more than that they exist, we do not provide any illuminating explanation.⁵² We then simply invoke them as unexplained explainers. This is why we should not limit ourselves to affirming that they exist, but should also try to describe their nature. In fact, we should spell out for each and every substance what its special nature is. Only then can we give an account of what makes change possible, and only then can we also give an account of the stability that is the distinctive mark of each and every substance.

There is a second reason for the difference between Suárez and Locke. When ridiculing traditional accounts, Locke compares substances to passive things that carry other things, without doing anything on their own. Suárez also takes substances to be bearers by characterizing them as subjects underlying all the perceptible features. But he adds that they are not completely passive things; rather, he considers them to be things with causal power that are able to bring about the very features we can perceive.⁵³ For instance, when characterizing the substance of a goat he would say that it is an active entity that brings about its own features of being white, soft, etc., but also activities like bleating and running. Here again,

51 I confine myself to sketching the reasons that are most obvious in the discussion of the knowability problem. There are also other reasons. Unlike Locke, Suárez thinks that one cannot explain psychological unity without reference to a substance (for discussion, see Rozemond, 2012); and unlike Locke, he assumes that there can be no subordination among perceivable features without a substance (for discussion, see Shields, 2012). He ascribes an explanatory role to substance in various contexts.

52 Locke explicitly calls the idea of substance “obscure”; see *Essay* II.xxiii.15 (Locke, 1975, 305).

53 In fact, every substantial form and hence every substance is an “intrinsic cause”, as has already been pointed out (see n. 45). It is therefore hardly surprising that Suárez constantly refers to substances when spelling out the four Aristotelian causes. For an analysis of all four causes, see Fink (2015).

Suárez would claim that there is a weak point in Locke's theory. It is not enough to refer to a bundle of perceptible features and activities: we also need to explain why all these features and activities are possible in the first place. What, for instance, makes it possible for a goat to bleat and run? That is, what is the causal principle that makes these activities possible? We also need to explain what makes ideas in a perceiver possible. Locke famously claims that secondary qualities are powers that produce certain ideas in us.⁵⁴ But why, Suárez would ask, are there such powers in the first place? What makes it possible for a thing to do something? As long as this fundamental question remains unanswered, all the talk about powers remains obscure – or so Suárez would argue. In any case, he attributes a crucial explanatory role to substances: they are principles of activity and make it understandable why all the features we observe can (and in fact do) exist.

This leads me to a third and final reason for the difference between Suárez and Locke. In arguing that we need to explain what makes the persistence of things as well as their activities possible, Suárez commits himself to metaphysical rationalism.⁵⁵ On his view, we should not simply accept the fact that there is something that persists despite all the changes we observe; we should also ask *why* this is the case. Similarly, we should not simply accept that the persisting thing can produce activities; we should also ask *why* this is the case. In short, we should always ask for a *reason*, for there is no such thing as a brute fact. When indicating a reason, we sometimes need to refer to entities we cannot observe, but which we need to accept in order to make sense of accessible facts. Substances are paradigmatic examples of such entities. They are not simply the product of our imagination or of metaphysical speculation; rather, they explain certain facts and therefore play an indispensable role. According to Suárez, it is exactly this role that a naïve empiricist overlooks. While agreeing that in our acquisition of knowledge we should start from sense perception, he emphasizes that we should not stop there: we should also engage in theoretical reasoning that reveals things which are not perceptible. If we do so, we will realize that there must be substances and that we can adduce good arguments for accepting that they are real entities – even entities that we can eventually describe in detail. The lack of immediate access to substances does not prevent us from acquiring solid knowledge of them.

54 See *Essay* II.viii.23–24 (Locke, 1975, pp. 140–141).

55 Or at least he commits himself to this position in the debate about knowledge of substances. Whether or not he defends unrestricted metaphysical rationalism, which applies the principle of sufficient reason without restriction in every area (see Della Rocca, 2010), remains to be examined.

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