Substantial Form Reconsidered

DM XV

Made-up and Malodorous

- Descartes: 'a philosophical being unknown to me' (AT 2:367; CSMK, 122).
- Henry Oldenburg, the first secretary of the Royal Society, congratulated Robert Boyle on having 'driven out that drivel of substantial forms,' which 'has stopped the progress of true philosophy, and made the best of scholars not more knowing as to the nature of particular bodies than the meanest ploughmen.' (3.67)
- Locke complained of the 'fruitless Enquiries after substantial Forms, [as] wholly unintelligible, and whereof we have scarce so much as any obscure, or confused Conception in general.' (*EHH* 3.6.10).
 - In general, Locke moans that writers before him took themselves to have discovered the real essence of things, because of 'the Doctrine of substantial Forms, and the confidence of mistaken Pretenders to a knowledge that they had not.' (*EHH* 3.8.2)

Malodorous to Musty

- Devolving into A. J. Ayer's dismissal of the debate over substance 'spurious' and as based on 'the primitive superstition that to every name a single real entity must correspond.' (1952, 40, 42)
- Finding a resigned but respectful echo in Shoemaker, who observes, fairly enough, when reflecting on Reid's criticisms of Locke, that all talk of substance has these days a 'musty smell' about it. (1984, 236)

Our Question

- Whence the scorn? Justified? Or?
- Compare Suárez:
 - 'The most powerful arguments establishing substantial forms are based on the necessity, for the perfect constitution of a natural being, that all the faculties and operations of that being are rooted in one essential principle.' (*DM* XV 10.61)

Approaching DM XV

- Two Poles regarding substantial forms (SF):
 - Negative
 - Epistemically motivated
 - Metaphysically motivated
 - Postive
 - A kind of datum
 - A kind of method

A Jaundiced Epistemic Take

- We have no access point to SF:
 - We have no acquaintance with SF.
 - They are, in consequence, forever beyond any our ken, and thus are simply unknowable.
 - So, as a counterfactual matter, even if they were supposed to exist, SF would be utterly inaccessible and so simply idle.
 - In short, they are otiose, occult, and permanently obscure.
 - Everything about SF offends against received scientific method.

A Misshapen Metaphysical Morass

- The very phrase 'substantial form' is an oxymoron:
 - Forms, whatever they are, are property-like.
 - As predicables, they are logically repeatable and evidently universal.
 - They are, moreover, most readily thought of as abstract.
 - Substances by contrast, are thing-like.
 - As subjects of predication, not predicated of anything else, they are not logically repeatable and evidently particular.
 - They are most readily thought of as concrete.
 - SF, if there were any, would be logically repeatable particulars, abstract concrete entities predicable of subjects while being subjects not predicable of anything at all.
- 'Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms! /Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health/ Stillwaking sleep, that is not what it is! (*Re3J* I,1, 169-171)

Antiquated in Any Case

- We might further note a salient feature of SF rendering them antiquated in any case:
 - They are meant to be more than dispositive: they are *active*, and indeed *directive*: they are introduced to play a causal, or at least quasi-causal role.
 - A formal is, after all, a cause, and, and Suárez himself agrees. Recall:
 - A cause is a *principium* 'that which truly and directly communicates (*influens*) some sort of being (*esse*) to that of which it is the principle.' (*DM* XII 1.25)
 - Cf. Kit Fine, someone broadly sympathetic to the Aristotelian metaphysical framework giving rise to SF:
 - 'Aristotle seems to have a possible basis for the belief [in individual forms], namely that forms are real and active principles in the world, which is denied to any right-minded modern' (1994, 19)

Right-minded Moderns

- Moving forward, a datum and a method:
 - The datum: there are non-arbitrary, privileged particulars.
 - Call this the *presumption of privilege*.
 - We approve: 'One must remain sympathetic to the attempt to find a *deep* ontological distinction between unified and arbitrary particulars. . .' (Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs*, 111-112)
 - The method: abduction
 - This paves the way to the presumption of privilege.

A Presumption of Privilege

- There are (*we* are) diachronic continuants, beings capable of remaining numerically one and the same while sustaining change.
- This judgment is made against the background of a a theory of categories:
 - Some beings are basic relative to others.
 - Some beings depend upon others for their existence in a more than causal manner:
 - Existentially:
 - y depends existentially on x =df (i) necessarily, if x did not exist y would not exist and (ii) possibly, x exists and y does not exist
 - Essentially:
 - y depends essentially on $x =_{df} (i)$ necessarily, any essence-specifying definition of y makes reference to the essence of x; and (ii) possibly, an essence-specifying definition x makes no reference to the essence of y

Abduction

- Abduction is here understood as a two-stage process:
 - (i) we make an observation which would be wildly improbable were there no explanation for it at all and for which a justifying explanation is tendered in the form of an hypothesis; and
 - (ii) a deductive argument is formed on the basis of that hypothesis, such that predictive power is delivered by the conclusion of the argument.

What, exactly, is a SF?

- Form is a certain simple and incomplete substance which, as the actuality of matter, constitutes with it the essence of a composite substance. (*DM* XV 5.1)
- forma est substantia quaedam simplex et incompleta, quae ut actus materiae cum ea constituit essentiam substantiae compositae
- x is a substantial form =_{df} x is a definite simple and incomplete substance, which, as the actuality of matter, constitutes with it the essence of composite substance

Pertinent this Definition I

- Suárez refrains from offering his definition of substantial forms until well after proving their existence.
 - This is in part because he maintains SF are inferred entities, rather than acquaintables.
 - It seems to derive equally, from a conviction that SF are as SF do.
 - They are at least *causally introduced* and may be best thought of as forming a *causal kind*.

Pertinent to this Definition II

- Suárez's definition parts company with a simpler definition of form as:
 - x is a form =df x gives being to some y (forma dat esse)
 - Expanded, this simpler traditional formulation holds an SF to be an internal cause, through which a thing is what it is, that is, a form is that which gives being to a thing
 - In a generic way, then, this formula may be taken to mean: form gives matter its being. (So Suárez represents the Thomists, though he is circumspect about Aquinas himself (*DM* XV. 8.2).)
 - Be that as it may, Suárez is keen to deny that claim: matter, as matter, is not parasitic upon form for its existence.
- Consequently, on Suárez's preferred approach, SF do not give being *tout court* to the compound, since an SF does not give the being of the matter to the compound.
 - This is at least in part the point of his saying that it constitutes with matter (*cum ea*) the essence of a composite: there are two autonomous internal causes.

The Existence of SF

- Why suppose anything answers to this definition?
- Three anti-existence arguments:
 - An argument from *otium*.
 - [N.b.: 1611 Sir W. Lower MS Let. 19 July f. 433: 'But indeed I have here much otium and therefore I may cast awaye some of it in vaine pursuites.']
 - An argument from incoherence
 - An argument from ingenerability

An Argument from Otium

• *DM* XV 1.1:

- The existence of substantial forms should be granted only if: (a) they are immediate items of experience; and (b) their existence is required to account for the actions and differences we perceive in things.
- 2. Not (1.a): no substantial form is an item of immediate experience.
- 3. Not (1.b): substantial forms are not required to account for the actions and differences we perceive in things.
- 4. Hence, we should not grant the existence of substantial forms.

Suarez's Response

- An Abduction:
 - First a concession: Locke is right. SF are not items of immediate experience.
 - Fortunately, (3) is false: the existence of SF is required to account for the actions and differences we perceive in things.
 - How?
 - SF are required as bases for accidents unified in a single subject (*DM* XV.1.7); as a related matter, SF are required to account for the subordination relations among properties, including accidents (*DM* XV. 1.14).
 - SF are required to account for substantial generation and corruption (DM XV.1.7).
 - SF are required to account for equilibrium states (DM XV.1.8).
 - A curious claim: the fact that the intense operation of one faculty tends to impede the activity others is best explained by the subordination of the various faculties to some one principle (this, says Suárez, is the *optima ratio*); for if they were truly independent of one another, there would be no reason why the operation of one should interfere with the operation of the others (*DM* XV.1.15).

An Argument from Incoherence

1. If x is a SF, then either (a) x is a subsistent thing, or (b) x inheres in some y as its subject.

- 2. If (1.a), then it is not possible that x inheres in some y.
- 3. Yet if x is a SF, then x *does* inhere in some y.
- 4. Hence, if x is a SF, then x both inheres and does not inhere in some y.
- 5. If x inheres in y, then x is an accident of y.
- 6. If x is a SF, then x is not an accident.
- 7. Hence, if (1.b), then, x both is and is not an accident.
- 8. Hence, if x is a SF, then x both inheres and does not inhere in some y, and x both is and is not an accident (4, 7).
- 9. (8) is self-contradictory twice over.
- 10. Hence, there is no x such that x is a substantial form.
 - 'Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms!'

Suárez Responds

- Not answered, really, in *DM* properly until *DM* XXXIV.5.14-21
- Short version: (3) is false.

An Argument from Ingenerability

1. If x is a SF, then either (a) x exists before x is generated, (b) part of x exists before x is generated, or (c) x is generated *ex nibilo*.

2. If (1.a), then (1.a.i) an infinite number of forms would pre-exist matter and (1.a.ii) no form would in fact come into being, but would only appear to do so.

3. Neither (1.a.i) nor (1.a.ii).

4. Hence, if x is a SF, x does not exist before it is generated.

5. If (1.b), then (1.b.i) the form is divisible, and (1.b.ii) the non-pre-existing part would either come from the pre-existing part or from nothing (in which case this alternative collapses into (1.c).

6. Not (1.b.i).

7. Hence, if x is a SF, x is generated *ex nibilo*.

8. Nothing is generated *ex nibilo*.

9. Hence, there is no x such that x is a SF.

Suárez Responds I

- First, a failed solution:
 - (8) is false.
 - After all, some things are generated *ex nibilo*, by creation.
 - Reply: This is so, but it would help our circumstance only if SF were created.
 - Minimally, this cannot be generalized.

Suárez Responds II

- Better: 8 may be variously construed (MD XV.2.13), with the result that (1) presents a false dilemma:
 - Some things may come to be without either being created or being generated out of something.
 - If we understand generation *ex nihilo* to mean created out of nothing, then it is true that material substantial forms do not come to be in that sense.
 - For, indeed, on this hypothesis, we would land ourselves in an infinite regress.
 - Still, if we understand generation *ex nibilo* to mean created in nothing, then it is false that material substantial forms do not come to be in that sense.
 - So, we end with a complex solution:
 - A rational substantial form is not drawn out of the potency of the matter; nor are its powers contained in that potency (*DM* XV.2.16).
 - Still, natural substantial forms may come to be without an act of creation, coming to be rather by the efficacy of the very action by which a compound is created.
 - In this sense, SF do not violate the maxim (DM XV.2.13).