



# Francisco Suárez on the Ontological Ground of Logical Possibility

RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

This article reassesses Suárez's claim that real essences are intrinsically logically possible. (Henceforth, this claim is referred to as 'ILP.')

Most scholars have understood ILP as asserting the independence of logical possibility from God's power; on their view, it in fact asserts that real essences in themselves explain logical possibility. As a result, the claim is in tension with Suárez's other thesis that real essences are nothing in themselves. Scholars have taken two main approaches to assessing this tension. Some, like John Doyle and Norman Wells, argue that Suárez contradicts himself. There is no way for real essences both to be intrinsically logically possible and also to be nothing. More recently, however, scholars have jumped to Suárez's defense. They argue that he avoids contradiction because they claim that he accepts some further radical thesis which allows him to remove the tension. But these scholars still accept the claim that ILP asserts that real essences explain logical possibility.

This article contests this basic interpretation. I will argue that ILP is not a thesis about the explanation or ground of logical possibility. First, it abstracts from notions of actual existence; as a result, it cannot be a claim about ontological explanation. Second, in order to conceive of logical possibility, intellectual operation is necessary; thus, it is not the sort of property which can have an ontological explanation in the usual sense. Third and finally, insofar as logical possibility can be explained, Suárez turns out to explain it through God's power.

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Scholars have found it challenging to make sense of Francisco Suárez's views about logical possibility. One claim in particular has been subject to a great deal of controversy. Suárez says that real essences are intrinsically apt to exist, i.e., that real essences are logically possible *ex se*.<sup>1</sup> Now, 'real essences' are simply what other philosophers refer to as *possibilia*: natures which God can produce. Since it is true by definition that *possibilia* are logically possible, there is no issue with the mere statement that real essences are logically possible. The source of perplexity is the qualification that real essences are *intrinsically* logically possible. Scholars going back to John Doyle (1967; 1987) and Norman Wells (1981a; 1981b) have suspected that Suárez embraces a radical thesis in asserting this—at least, radical by scholastic standards. Based on additional textual evidence which we will explore in short order, many scholars maintain that for him, logical possibility is not explained in terms of God's power to produce creatures. Quite the opposite: Suárezian real essences are taken to explain logical possibility independently of God's power.

According to Doyle and Wells, this is a problematic view for Suárez to defend because he cannot consistently maintain it. Because he elsewhere insists that real essences are intrinsically nothing, it would seem that he cannot also claim that essences independently explain any property. Or such is their criticism. A number of recent scholars, however, have leapt to Suárez's defense against the charge of inconsistency. What is interesting is that they accept Doyle and Wells' interpretation that Suárezian real essences *explain* logical possibility independently of God's productive power. The more recent scholars' defense is that he avoids self-contradiction in virtue of accepting some additional revisionary metaphysical thesis that dissolves the tension.

Unfortunately, I fear that this scholarship and the ensuing debate are predicated on an incorrect interpretive assumption about Suárez's thesis about logical possibility. In order to tease out this assumption, section 1 of this paper will examine briefly how Doyle and Wells framed their analysis. Section 2 will then highlight the fact that even dissenting scholars continue to accept one of their important interpretations. With this established, we can then reconsider the claim that real essences are intrinsically logically possible. Based on a number of passages from the *Metaphysical Disputations*, I will argue in section 3 that this claim is in no wise a thesis about the explanation or ground of logical possibility. Rather, it concerns the epistemic basis for the intellect to recognize a logical consistency between abstract terms. In section 4, I will respond to a potential objection to my interpretive thesis.

## DOYLE AND WELLS ON SUÁREZIAN REAL ESSENCES

In order to understand why there has been so much perplexity on this topic, it is useful to consider Doyle and Wells' framing of it. They begin with one of Suárez's well recognized theses about real essences. He maintains the then standard view that creaturely essences exist in only one of two ways. Either they exist in potentiality as the possible objects of God's productive power, or they exist in actuality as really produced by God. This was the common scholastic view, and Suárez is at pains to defend the party line. Suárez summarizes his view by insisting that real essences are 'absolutely nothing' apart from God's productive power (DM 31.2.1).<sup>2</sup>

There really isn't anything remarkable about Suárez endorsing this view. He is simply asserting that creatures entirely depend upon God for their existence. However, scholars argue that in the course of sorting out some of his technical metaphysical distinctions, he develops a non-standard view about essences which stands in tension with this claim.

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1 As will be shown below, for Suárez 'aptitude for existing' and 'logical possibility' are equivalent expressions. In addition, they are distinct from the notion of potential existence through an extrinsic cause.

2 'Principio statuendum est essentiam creaturae, seu creaturam de se et priusquam a Deo fiat, *nullum habere in se verum esse reale, et in hoc sensu, praeciso esse existentiae, essentiam non esse rem aliquam, sed omnino esse nihil.*' All references to Suárez's *Disputationes Metaphysicae* are cited 'DM', followed by the book, section, and paragraph, and are taken from volumes 25 and 26 of Suárez (1856–77).

The context for this alleged development is Suárez's account of the proper object of metaphysics. Metaphysics he says is the science of 'real being' (DM 2.4.3; see Darge 2015).<sup>3</sup> Importantly, he distinguishes between two ways of conceiving real being (DM 2.4.9).<sup>4</sup> According to the main signification, real being refers to existence, whether it is actual or possible existence (DM 2.4.11).<sup>5</sup> This is being in the sense of being in act—even if only potentially so. According to the second signification, however, real being can signify real essence. As noted in the introduction, real essences are simply the natures of creatures in themselves.

In claiming that an essence could count as a real being, Suárez has to explain that not any old essence will do. In particular, 'beings of reason', such as mental fictions and negative notions, do not count as real beings (Novotný 2015). These depend solely upon the intellect for their existence. (Their existence reduces entirely to objective being through the intellect.) In order to safeguard real essences, Suárez thus has to explain what makes them independent of mental being, but he must do so without appealing to their existence. The quality which makes them real, Suárez says, is their logical possibility. It is in explaining how they are logically possible that Suárez asserts:

**ILP:** real essences are intrinsically logically possible.<sup>6</sup>

(As a short hand, I will refer to this claim as 'ILP.')

Because of their intrinsic logical possibility or aptitude for existence, real essences are not mere mental fabrications, and so they can be included in the science of metaphysics. Or, such is Suárez's conclusion in *Metaphysical Disputation 2*.

Before proceeding, it is important to note how logical possibility has been understood by scholars. Logical possibility has been treated like a real property of things which is conception-independent. Doyle, to his credit, correctly notes that it is a property which is 'quasi-negative,' insofar as it is analyzed by Suárez in terms of two negatives—i.e., non-contradictoriness. However, Doyle and Wells both treat it as something quasi-real, as well. For instance, Doyle discusses it as being a 'positive [property] of sorts' (Doyle 1967: 42), which is the 'core reality' characterizing possibles (Doyle 1967: 48); it is their intrinsically knowable property (Doyle 1967: 44). Furthermore, he treats it as a property which explains something about real entities (namely their multiplicity) and upon which God's knowledge depends (Doyle 1967: 48, 45). In other words, Doyle seems to think that logical possibility enters into relations of explanation and dependence. He even speaks of it as being a property independent of God and divine power (Doyle 1967: 46). In short, because dependence and independence concern explanations of what exists or of how things exist, Doyle thus treats logical possibility as if it were a real or categorial property.<sup>7</sup> So, in point of fact, Doyle, Wells and the other scholars whom I discuss below all treat it at least *as if* it were a positive or real property—and, in one scholar's case, as being a positive property without qualification.<sup>8</sup>

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3 'Rursus constat ex communi usu, ens, etiam sumptum pro ente reali (ut nunc loquimur) non solum tribui rebus existentibus, sed etiam naturis realibus secundum se consideratis, sive existant, sive non: quomodo Metaphysica considerat ens & hoc modo ens in decem praedicamenta dividitur.'

4 He says:

ens secundum illam duplicem acceptionem non significare duplicem rationem entis dividendam aliquam communem rationem, seu conceptum communem, sed significare conceptum entis, magis vel minus praecisum: ens enim in vi nominis sumptum significat id, quod habet essentiam realem, praescindendo ab actuali existentia, non quidem excludendo illam, seu negando, sed praecisive tantum abstrahendo, ens vero ut participium est, significat ipsum ens reale, seu habens essentiam realem cum existentia actuali, et ita significat illud magis contractum. (DM 2.4.9).

5 See my argument in section 3 that potential existence is conceived by negating the notion of actual existence.

6 He mentions their aptitude for existence at DM 2.4.5, and says that it is intrinsic (*ex se*) in DM 2.4.7. He claims specifically that 'unde solum dicere possumus, essentiam realem eam esse, quae ex se apta est esse, seu realiter existere' (DM 2.4.7). Note that 'logical consistency', 'non-contradiction', and 'aptness for existence' are equivalent expressions for Suárez. He writes for instance, '... quidquid ex se non repugnat, sit possibile per ipsam' (DM 30.17.10). See also DM 42.3.9.

7 He even says that on the final analysis, because of their intrinsic logical possibility, real essences are intrinsically 'not nonbeings' (Doyle 1967: 48). By double negation, this suggests that they are intrinsically beings in some sense.

8 Vale argues expressly that logical possibility is a 'simple' and 'basic' property which is not at all negative. See section 2 below.

According to Doyle and Wells, a contradiction arises for Suárez with the assertion of ILP. It is impossible for real essences to be nothing in themselves and also for real essences to be intrinsically logically possible. As they suggest, if real essences are nothing in themselves, then it is not possible for them to be *intrinsically* anything, let alone, intrinsically logically possible.<sup>9</sup> The more consistent view, think Doyle and Wells, would be that logical possibility depends upon God. But they think that Suárez rules out this view in order to explain how real essences are distinct from beings of reason.

Everything hinges on the qualification, ‘intrinsically’ (or, *ex se*). I confess that Doyle’s and Wells’ understanding of this term can be a bit hard to pin down, as they are neither precise nor totally clear on this front. In fact, Doyle in particular waffles a bit in his explanation of Suárez’s views, remarking in one place that Suárez cannot possibly mean that real essences are ‘real,’ but arguing in another that Suárez nonetheless says essence are ‘not nonbeings’ (which, by double negation and without further qualification entails that they are beings).<sup>10</sup> Wells, on the other hand accuses Suárez of being the one who oscillates (Wells 1981a: 74; Wells 1981b: 169). In any case, as far as I am able to make sense of their textual analyses and criticisms, Doyle and Wells seem to think that ILP amounts to the following claims:

- (1) that real essences *explain* logical possibility, and
- (2) that real essences explain logical possibility *independently* from God’s power.

Now, it is not immediately apparent from *Metaphysical Disputation 2* why ILP should amount to these claims. However, based on other texts, scholars have argued that Suárez appeals to logical possibility in order to explain God’s power.<sup>11</sup> They take it that logical possibility is thus something ‘independent’ from God’s power (to use Doyle’s language). And if logical possibility is independent from God’s power, then it is a basic feature of something else—namely, of real essences. If this is the case, then ILP could naturally be read as asserting that logical possibility is a basic feature of real essences. In this way, real essences of themselves (*ex se*) explain why anything is logically possible at all.

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9 This is an issue for Doyle, Wells, and Vale, because they treat logical possibility as the sort of property which requires explanation.

10 It is significant to note that Doyle beats around the bush in his criticism. He nowhere explicitly says that Suárez contradicts himself. However, he clearly states that Suárez goes too far by endorsing ILP. Furthermore, the reason why Doyle thinks he goes too far is that (i.) Suárez cannot claim that real essences are literally real, but that (ii.) Suárez in fact says that logical possibility is independent of God and not non-real.

11 Here’s the passage in question:

Therefore, in order to clarify the omnipotence of God and its adequate object, the theologians say that whatever does not involve a contradiction is possible through the omnipotence of God. [...] And the reason may be taken from what has been said, for possibility can be conceived in two ways. First, positively, in terms of power... Secondly, by non-contradiction. It must therefore be taken at present in this [latter] manner. Therefore, everything that does not involve contradiction is possible with respect to the omnipotence of God. (DM 30.17.10)

Vale thinks that this is clear evidence that logical possibility explains God’s productive power in some way. ‘God knows possible natures and can produce them because in themselves they are capable of being known and of existing without contradiction, and not in the first instance because they are the objects of divine power or divine intellection’ (2017: 83). As he qualifies, ‘*Independently* of whether or not an unproduced essence is the object of divine power or intellection, it is in itself non-repugnant to being created and known’ (2017: 85, my emphasis). And if logical possibility explains God’s power, then God’s power cannot explain logical possibility (at the pain of circularity). Thus, this passage supports the view that logical possibility is independent of God.

I take serious issue with this interpretation. It is clear from the context that appealing to logical possibility does not explain God’s power, but rather clarifies what the object of God’s omnipotence is. Suárez is arguing that if you explain God’s power in terms of what God can do, then you use the same term to clarify itself. As this is not illuminating in the slightest, it is better to clarify what God can produce in terms of what is logically possible. But this is only to identify the object of God’s power. It is not to explain why God has that power. For as Suárez goes on to explain, ‘And so the *principle* is not sought, but the infinite power or capacity (so to speak) of that power is *explained*, so that whatever does not contradict itself is possible through it’ (DM 30.17.10, my emphasis). Suárez is thus offering an explanation of what is *meant* by the notion of ‘divine power’.

There is one further assumption that Doyle and Wells are making, and this is about the nature of the explanation involved. They seem to think:

(3) for something to explain a property, that thing must exist in some way.<sup>12</sup>

This further assumption is necessary in order to generate the contradiction to which they allege that Suárez is committed. The claim which Doyle (implicitly) and Wells (explicitly) think is contradicted is the thesis that real essences are nothing in themselves. In order for there to be a contradiction on this point, ILP would have to entail that real essences are in some way *not* nothing in themselves—that they are *something* in themselves.<sup>13</sup> So, how are we supposed to get from ILP to the claim that real essences are something in themselves? Only if real essences exist in some way independently from God in order to explain logical possibility independently from God. And why think that an existing thing is necessary? Only if an existing thing is necessary to explain why there is a property. This is exactly the issue which Wells raises:

Suarez appears to remain oblivious to the problem of a residual possibility on the part of the essences of creatures themselves and prior to their creation. [...] Wherefore, the whole issue is brought to bear upon the intrinsic *potentia logica* or *possibile logicum*, purportedly independent of God's omnipotence, and not upon the extrinsic consideration involved in the *esse potentiale objectivum* in regard to God's omnipotence. (Wells 1981a: 82–3)

Wells is arguing that ILP entails that there literally exists something in real essences which is independent of God's power. He refers to this as the 'residual possibility' independent of God's omnipotence.

To summarize: Doyle and Wells to varying degrees accuse Suárez of asserting the following contradictory views. If real essences are supposed to explain logical possibility *ex se* and independently from divine productive power, this requires that real essences have to exist independently from divine productive power. But then, real essences would not be 'absolutely nothing.' Real essences would in fact have to have some existence (even if it is just some sort of residual potential existence) independently from God's power. The crucial assumption underpinning the whole analysis, as we have seen, is a condition on what is necessary for explanation. For a

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12 To be technical, I think they assume the following view:

x explains P independently of y only if x exists independently of y.

Under this assumption, ILP would contradict the thesis that real essences are absolutely nothing.

13 Here's a clear formulation of the problem:

The question remains, What is the ultimate *reality* of a merely possible thing; what more than objective being can it have? In other words, what is there in a mere possible thing which permits its inclusion under the common concept of being as a noun, while the lack of which blocks a similar inclusion of a being of reason? In reply, first let us say that this 'more' (our word) cannot be a positive or actual reality on the part of the essence itself. As Suarez has stated, prior to its creation a mere possible has no reality which can properly be called positive or actual. (Doyle 1967: 40)

Here, he states that the thesis that essences are in themselves absolutely nothing is the more fundamental one. Thus, he reminds the reader that Suárez cannot say that real essences have any intrinsic reality apart from God. Nonetheless, Doyle notes that ILP ultimately commits Suárez to the view that real essences are 'independently and truly what they are', because they 'are of themselves being, true and intelligible' (Doyle 1967: 46). This is the case 'even if there were no God' (Doyle 1967: 48).

Doyle is a very charitable scholar, indicating that Suárez contradicts himself without outright saying it. In fact, his scholarship corrected that of Cronin, who had argued that the real being of a real essence was identical to its being in the intellect of God. Doyle explains to the contrary that real being is distinct from existence in the intellect. If real essences were identified with objective being in the intellect, then there would be no way to distinguish them from beings of reason. Beings of reason only have objective being in the intellect. Thus, Doyle draws a distinction which Cronin failed to recognize. But in outlining Suárez's sophisticated understanding of the distinction between real essences and beings of reason, he suggests that that Suárez goes too far. He says that this distinction 'is purchased at too high a price for us' (Doyle 1967: 48). He concludes with Suárez's ultimate tension: 'These possibilities [i.e., real essences] have no positive existential or essential content; but they are beings in the sense that, inasmuch as they are noncontradictions, they are not nonbeings' (Doyle 1967: 48). The reader must recognize that to be *not* non-being is to be a being of some sort. Thus, Doyle's analysis leads the reader to the conclusion that a real essence is a being intrinsically and independently from God. But rather than outright level the accusation of there being a contradiction, Doyle leaves the reader with the tension, seemingly unable to deliver the final blow. To criticize is no problem for Wells, however, who accuses how outright for contradicting himself.

thing to be an *explanans* in this sense it must exist in some way. To use contemporary terminology, Doyle and Wells are thereby construing ILP as a claim about grounding.<sup>14</sup>

It should be stressed that Doyle and Wells were of course incredibly careful, comprehensive, and (most importantly for the present issue) sympathetic interpreters of Suárez. Their criticisms are made in light of what they think follows from the claim that real essences are intrinsically nothing (Doyle 1967: 40). But even so, they are convinced that he is at least straining his view. Doyle for instance is more cautious in his criticism. He does not think that it was Suárez's intention that ILP should entail that real essences are literal things. But he still thinks that Suárez inadvertently is committed to the view that real essences possess something independently from God's power. On his reading, a real essence's independent possibility both explains a real feature of reality (namely, the diversity of natural kinds) and also is that upon which God himself depends for knowledge of what is possible. His closing remarks indicate that even he finds something amiss: 'These possibilities have no positive existential or essential content; but they are beings in the sense that, inasmuch as they are noncontradictions, they are not nonbeings' (Doyle 1967: 48). Wells is more explicitly critical. He is not so concerned with Suárez's intention. He outright faults him for accepting a view which entails that real essences are something independently from God, and thus must exist.

We can thus summarize Doyle and Wells' concern with these two points:

- (4) ILP is the thesis that real essences explain/ground logical possibility;
- (5) point (4) commits Suárez to the view that real essences (or some aspect of them) must be independent of God's productive power.

On Wells' final judgment (drawing upon the findings of Doyle), point (5) contradicts Christian dogma and conflicts with Suárez's stated metaphysical views about essences being nothing in themselves. Thus,

- (6) point (4) is inconsistent and Suárez ought to be criticized for asserting ILP.

## RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

In recent years, a number of scholars have argued that Suárez does not in fact maintain inconsistent views, thereby denying point (6). Scholars who defend Suárez do so on rather interesting grounds, however. Two scholars in particular, namely Matthew Vale (2017) and Amy Karofsky (2001), have in fact doubled down on point (4), making it very clear that *they agree* that ILP is a claim about explanation or grounding.<sup>15</sup> They claim Suárez avoids internal contradiction, however, because they argue that he embraces further non-standard metaphysical theses. Space does not allow us to engage with their views in full, but we can outline them in brief.

Matthew Vale's interpretation has three important components: a claim about logical possibility, a claim about ILP's consistency with Suárez's views, and a claim about ILP's cogency. First, as for logical possibility, Vale goes beyond Doyle and claims that logical possibility is a 'simple' and 'positive' property (Vale 2017: 93–5). This means that it is a genuine feature of reality which either is grounded in something else or is ungrounded and basic.

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<sup>14</sup> Their concern thus boils down to the following assumption: *x* explains property *P* if, and only if, *x* exists in some way and *P* exists because of *x*. See Schaffer (2009), for a lucid contemporary introduction to grounding. He notes that explanations of this kind must appeal to existing things in order to explain what is real.

<sup>15</sup> Vale for instance argues, 'Suarez's account of absolute possibility is intended to secure some intrinsic reality for essences that is not grounded in, or generated by, their being the object of divine intellection or [creative] power' (Vale 2017: 85).

Karofsky does not focus on the issue of non-contradiction, but instead on Suárez's claim that the properties of real essences are necessarily connected independently of any power to produce them. I will discuss this in section 4. For now what is essential is Karofsky's general claim. She argues that true connections between essential predicates are not grounded in God's power to produce them. She does apply this general claim to non-contradiction, which is a true connection between essential predicates (Karofsky 2001: 39). If her general thesis is correct, then it would entail that logical possibility would not be grounded in God's productive power.

Second, Vale argues that ILP is consistent with Suárez's other claims. He agrees with Doyle and Wells that ILP is a thesis about the explanation or basis of logical possibility. But he denies that it is inconsistent with real essences' being nothing in themselves. The reason is that he thinks Suárez accepts looser conditions on grounding. These amount to the following two sub-claims. (A.) He implicitly ascribes to Suárez the view that grounding is not transitive. On most accounts of grounding, if some  $x$  entirely grounds some  $y$ , and if  $y$  in turn grounds property  $P$ , it would follow that  $x$  also grounds  $P$ . Vale in effect denies that Suárez maintains this. On his interpretation, God's power entirely grounds the existence of real essences, but real essences ground logical possibility independently from God's power. Even though real essences are absolutely nothing apart from God's power, they nonetheless ground a property on their own (2017: 91–3).<sup>16</sup> (B.) Vale claims that real essences can ground a real, basic property without themselves being anything (2017: 83–5).<sup>17</sup> This amounts to the claim that  $x$  grounds (positive) property  $P$ , even though  $x$  is not a thing. Given these two loosened conditions on grounding, there would be no conflict with the claim that essences are intrinsically nothing. An intrinsic nothing could explain a basic, positive property. Or so thinks Vale.

Third and finally, Vale argues that views (A.) and (B.) are metaphysically cogent. Though they may not be standard for scholastic theologians, they are perfectly legitimate principles to accept (Vale 2017: 93). Thus, Vale not only has interpretive differences with Doyle and Wells, but he has an evaluative difference. There is no basis for criticizing Suárez for having 'gone too far' or for having contradicted his other principles.

Vale demonstrates a thorough knowledge of Suárez's texts and his historical context. However, I do not think that the views which he ascribes to Suárez are cogent in the slightest. It seems metaphysically impossible that one thing  $y$  could be entirely grounded in  $x$ , but that  $y$  could ground further features of reality independently of  $x$ .<sup>18</sup> It is likewise untenable to maintain that  $y$  alone grounds  $P$ , but that  $y$  in itself is not a thing. It does not seem possible for a non-thing to explain anything at all.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, Vale's views run into difficulties as an interpretation of Suárez's actual claims. The views which he ascribes are not found in Suárez. Nor could they be. For, a decade prior to Vale's piece, Amy Karofsky correctly argued that Suárez could not accept anything like them (Karofsky 2001: 38, 42 and 45). She notes that he clearly provides a truth-maker theory inconsistent with them. Suárez thinks that for  $P$  to belong essentially to  $S$  (where  $P$  and  $S$  are predicate and subject terms, respectively),  $S$  and  $P$  must be really united, either actually or possibly (DM 31.12.46). There must be some actual or possible thing  $x$ , whose nature  $S$  is or has  $P$ . Vale clearly is taking ILP to be a case of essential predication, because he thinks that logical possibility is a positive and basic property which is essential to all creatures and which derives from their creatureliness. Based on that assumption, Suárez could not accept the looser conditions on grounding which Vale advances.

But what of Karofsky's alternative interpretation? I should underscore that her solution to the puzzle is rather intriguing and quite brilliant. She thinks that Suárez escapes contradiction because the terms of real essences (namely, their subjects and predicates, like 'animal' and 'rational') are in fact identical to different properties of the divine nature (Karofsky 2001: 42–3). And because the divine nature is eternal, so are the connections between these properties. Now, logical possibility

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16 The view he ascribes to Suárez is a bit strange on this score. He argues that logical possibility is not grounded on anything that exists—neither God (or divine power) nor an actual creature. In fact, Vale insists that real essences are not things at all. Even so, logical possibility still belongs to creatures and it belongs to them independently of anything else. Moreover, logical possibility is a simple and positive property.

17 This is where Vale's Suárez becomes even more non-standard. Even though real essences do not exist in themselves, they nonetheless independently have logical possibility (as just noted). It is in virtue of this independent property that they can therefore explain things, such as God's knowledge.

18 The difficulty is deeper. On Vale's proposed interpretation, real essences would entirely depend upon God for their existence, and yet they would also explain certain features of God, such as his knowledge of possibility and his power to create. One would think that this would amount to a circular case of explanation.

19 Is it not a scholastic principle that nothing comes from nothing? Or to dress this up in contemporary garb: nothing ontologically grounds nothing. Again, it is not my intention to be uncharitable on this front. However, it does not seem that Vale has completely comprehended the metaphysical ramifications of the claims which he ascribes to Suárez.

is one such connection. Thus, real essences ground logical possibility. Importantly, they do so because they are in some way identical to God's nature. Thus, it is God's nature and not his power which grounds logical possibility.

While her view is quite brilliant, it also is not an adequate interpretation of Suárez. She offers no textual evidence that Suárez takes real essences to be identical to God's nature.<sup>20</sup> Without any direct textual evidence, the only motivation for thinking that Suárez adopts this view is a principle of charity; but the principle of charity would kick in only if we thought that there was otherwise no way around point (5). However, I will argue in the next section that ILP has been misunderstood by all of the scholars discussed so far and that, furthermore, it does not contradict Suárez's other central theses.

## MY INTERPRETATION

We have covered a lot of terrain here. What I want to do in the present section is explain why the original criticisms and the later proposed interpretations have been misguided. I will argue that when ILP is understood in context, it will become clear that it is not a claim about the explanation or ground of logical possibility. Rather, it is a claim about how the intellect conceives and formulates a logical relation between abstractly conceived terms. If this is so, then ILP does not conflict with the claim that real essences are absolutely nothing independently of God. Furthermore, there is no need to claim that Suárez adopts some additional revisionary thesis in order to avoid a contradiction.

There are three parts of my argument. The first focuses on the nature of real essences, whereas the second focuses on the nature of logical possibility. These two parts together show why there is no conflict between ILP and Suárez's claim that real essences are absolutely nothing. The third part of my argument is a smoking-gun passage where Suárez explicitly connects logical possibility to God's power. This will show that, on the final analysis, Suárez takes logical possibility to be explained by divine power.

We begin with real essences. My first claim is that ILP cannot be a claim about ontological grounds or explanations. The reason is that any real essence—that is, the subject-term of ILP—is conceived abstractly from existential notions altogether. To conceive of a real essence is thus to abstract from concepts relevant to grounding or explanation. In order to demonstrate that this is Suárez's view, it is necessary to return to the context in which he asserts ILP, namely, his distinction between two ways of signifying real being. To review: 'real being' can refer either to actual existence or to creaturely natures considered in themselves (DM 2.4.9). This much is recognized by all the scholars discussed so far. One crucial detail of this account, however, has been ignored. When signifying a real essence as a real being, the intellect conceives of the essence in itself and apart from any consideration of its existence. To speak technically, a real essence is understood by prescinding from all conception of existence.<sup>21</sup> As Suárez explains:

*ens enim in vi nominis sumptum significat id, quod habet essentiam realem, praescindendo ab actuali existentia, non quidem excludendo illam, seu negando, sed praecisive tantum abstrahendo. (DM 2.4.9)*

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20 She directly quotes no passages in support of this ultimate interpretive claim that Suárez considers real essences to be 'ultimately identical with the divine essence' (Karofsky 2001: 43). In the course of making her argument, though, she does offer one quotation in a footnote, but it turns out not to support her case: '... ergo neque essentia manere potest sub aliquo vero esse reali distincto ab esse creatoris' (DM 31.2.4). This singular quotation is insufficient to establish her interpretation for two reasons. (1) The passage in question does not identify essences with God's essence or being, but instead simply says that there is some dependence of essences upon God. (2) More importantly, the context of this quote is Suárez's refutation of Capreolus' view that there is essential being which is neither nothing nor objective potency. Suárez's claim is that there is no third ontological status distinct from nothingness and dependence on God. So, it turns out that this quotation is consistent with the view that real essences in fact depend upon God's productive power—an interpretation which I defend below.

21 Precision concerns the scope of the *intension* of a concept. A precise concept abstracts from some features of a thing by completely ignoring them and by focusing instead on other features (Pereira 2004: 669, 674).



There is a significant detail to note. Because the conception of a real essence prescind from actual existence, it does not negate or deny actual existence. It simply ignores it.

As a result, the logical potency ascribed to a real essence is distinct from objective potency. Objective potency is the existence which something has simply as the potential object of an extrinsic power (Embry 2017). Importantly, even though objective potencies can be said to have potential being through their causes, nonetheless in themselves they are non-existent or non-actual. Consequently, in order to conceive of a potential being in this sense, it is necessary to conceive of actual existence and to deny that actual existence. As Suárez says,

Ex quo ulterius intelligitur ens sumptum in vi nominis non significare ens in potentia, quatenus privative vel negative opponitur enti in actu, sed significare solum ens ut præcise dicit essentiam realem, quod valde diversum est, sicut enim abstractio præcisiva diversa est a negativa: ita ens nominaliter sumptum, licet præcise dicat ens habens essentiam realem, non vero addit negationem, scilicet carendi existentiali actuali, quam negationem seu privationem addit ens in potentia. (DM 2.4.11)

Conceiving of potential (but non-actual) existence is thus different from conceiving of a real essence. To conceive of a real essence is not to conceive of the privation of actual existence; it is to abstract from the conception of existence altogether.

Returning to our main issue: this analysis shows that the subject term of ILP completely abstracts from notions of actual existence. Because the notion of existence is necessary for making claims about ontological grounds or explanations, our analysis entails that ILP cannot be a claim about grounding or explanation. It has nothing to do with existential considerations. As a result, it cannot conflict with the claim that essences are nothing in themselves. In fact, because this latter claim denies actual existence, it requires conceiving of an essence in terms of actual existence. So, the latter claim and ILP refer to real essences with different senses of “real being.”

Importantly, however, Suárez explains that we can still signify precisely conceived essences as *real* beings because they are distinct from mere beings of reason. As noted above, mere beings of reason depend entirely on the intellect’s conception of them, because either they are mental fictions or they involve negations (DM 54.3.3).<sup>22</sup> Thus, their existence entirely reduces to objective reality, that is, existence through being conceived. When a real essence is conceived, on the other hand, there is a feature which is recognized as being conception-independent. This is admittedly a rather peculiar way of conceiving reality. ‘Being’ in this sense is not conceived in terms of actuality in either its positive or negative division. Rather, it is the intellect’s recognition that the essence considered alone is not conception-dependent.

Contrary to the scholars discussed above, this conception-independence of real essences is not a feature which is somehow ungrounded or unexplained by God’s power. As I have just argued, ILP cannot be a claim about grounding because it asserts nothing about actual or potential existence. Instead, what is recognized as ‘real’ is the fact that a real essence’s terms can be conjoined without requiring the intellect’s operation. In other words, to conceive of a nature as being a real essence, the mind is recognizing that its own activity was not required in conjoining the terms. (A contrast is useful here: to conceive of a square circle, it is necessary for an intellect to actively (and incorrectly) put the two terms, ‘square’ and ‘circle’ together; to conceive of a rational animal, on the other hand, the intellect is not required to fabricate or force the union.) Thus, the conception of an essence as real is the recognition of something mind-independent that nonetheless does not involve existential import: namely, the consistency of the abstractly conceived subject and predicate terms.

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<sup>22</sup> “[W]hat is normally and rightly defined as a being of reason is that which has being only objectively in the intellect or is that which is thought by reason as being, even though it has no entity in itself” (DM 54.1.6; Suárez 1995: 62).

The second part of my argument confirms this reading. It turns out that Suárez provides a very clear analysis of the property of logical possibility.<sup>23</sup> As he explains, logical possibility is not a real or even a quasi-real property. Rather, logical possibility is a logical relation between two intensions, and it is formulated using a negation; it furthermore requires the intellect to formulate it. As a result, it is not the sort of property which needs an explanatory ground in the senses discussed by Doyle, Wells, Vale, and Karofsky.

As he explains in his systematic treatment of possibility in *Metaphysical Disputation* 42, logical possibility is a negative possibility. It is worth quoting in full:

one [notion of possibility] is as it were negative... [viz.,] non-repugnance to being, and this is usually called logical possibility and to it corresponds logical potency, which is thus called because it does not consist in any simple and real power [*facultate*], but only in the non-inconsistency of the extreme [terms], and thus is seen more in the order concerning the composition and division of the mind, which looks to [that which is] logical. Hence this logical potency has nothing to do with the constitution of any category, as is clear from itself. (DM 42.3.9)<sup>24</sup>

There are a number of important details to note. Not only is this an unequivocal statement that logical possibility is not a positive property, but the passage also underscores the fact that an intellectual operation is necessary in forming the very notion of logical possibility. As I hinted above, logical possibility as a property is formulated when the intellect recognizes that its operations are not necessary for conjoining two terms; the terms are seen as being compatible in themselves. To conceive of this relation, the intellect then uses a negative term.

A bit more can be said about the nature of logical possibility. Though Suárez does not expressly classify logical possibility this way,<sup>25</sup> the notion fits best under his category of a *relation of reason with a foundation*.<sup>26</sup> Categorizing it this way makes the most sense of his analysis of possibility in terms of non-contradiction. The first salient detail about non-contradiction is that strictly speaking it is not a real property.<sup>27</sup> Rather, non-contradiction is a *relation of reason*, depending upon a mental action. Here's why. As he says in the quotation above, non-contradiction obtains between two extremes, i.e., between two terms. These are conceptions of the properties of a real essence, such as its genus or species. In scholastic parlance, these conceptions are called intentions (DM 54.6.9). Non-contradiction is thus a *relation*, because each extreme is ordered to the other extreme in some way.<sup>28</sup> In particular, each extreme is ordered to the other as being consistent with it. This is to say, each is instantiable or creatable with the other. Importantly, however, non-contradiction is a *relation of reason*. The ordering depends upon mental operation in two ways. First, the extremes or properties are not really distinct.<sup>29</sup> (This is why Suárez references the operations of composition and division.) The properties need to be distinguished by separate terms in order for an ordering to be recognized at all. Second, those terms then need to be related to each other. As Suárez states, non-contradiction is not a positive or categorial relation, meaning that the terms do not

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23 He uses the following three expressions equivalently: logical possibility, non-contradictory, and aptitude for existence. The notion captured by these three expressions is distinct from the notion of objective potency.

24 '[U]num est quasi negativum, nimirum, non repugnancia essendi, et hoc dici solet possibile logicum, eique correspondet potentia logica, quae ita appellatur quia non consistit in aliqua simplici et reali facultate, sed in sola non repugnancia extremorum, et ita magis cernitur in ordine ad mentis compositionem ac divisionem, quae ad logicum spectat. Unde haec potentia logica nihil pertinet ad constitutionem alicuius praedicamenti, ut per se clarum est.'

25 At least to my knowledge.

26 See DM 54.6.9-11 for Suárez's classification of relations of reason. See Penner (2013) and Novotný (2015) for the details of his account of relations.

27 *Contra Vale* (2017). Suárez says as much when he denies the logical possibility is real (or categorial) possibility in DM 42.3.9.

28 Penner explains that every relation has a foundation (in a subject) and terminus (2013: 3-5).

29 Novotný (2015) explains there are three conditions for a relation to be a real relation. Because non-contradiction fails to meet this particular condition, I argue that it must be a relation of reason.

actively relate to each other. Rather, they must be compared to each other for their relation to be recognized.<sup>30</sup>

There is a second important detail to underscore, namely that non-contradiction cannot properly be called positive (Doyle 1967). Though non-contradiction has a positive basis, i.e., a positive foundation in the real essence, the notion of the relation is in fact a negative property. To be non-contradictory is for one term *not* to be ordered to the *negation* of the other.<sup>31</sup> As scholars have noted, this is in effect a double negation, as it expresses a lack of contradiction (Doyle 1967).<sup>32</sup> That the relation should be the negation of a negation is necessary given that its foundation is positive. After all, the only way to adequately capture a positive through a negation is to use a double negation.<sup>33</sup> But the conception of the relation requires the conception of negative terms all the same. This is expressly claimed in the quotation above when Suárez refers to logical possibility as negative possibility.

To sum up the first two parts of my argument so far: ILP is not a claim about grounding or explaining logical possibility. When real essences are conceived, they are conceived abstractly from actual or possible existence, meaning that they are conceived abstractly from ontological notions altogether. Instead, their reality is simply their conception-independence. When Suárez says that they are logically possible or non-contradictory, he is expressing a relation of reason, founded in their essential features. This relation is the negative relation of essential features not excluding each other.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is not a quasi-real or basic property which requires grounding in the usual sense at all.

Once we understand the subject and predicate terms of ILP, a more plausible reading becomes evident. When Suárez says that real essences are *ex se* or *intrinsice* logically possible, he is noting the *epistemic* basis of the *judgment* that ‘real essences are logically possible.’ Because the conception of a real essence prescind from the notion of existence, that conception considers only the abstracted properties of the essence in question. And because those abstracted properties—and those properties alone—are recognized as being compatible, Suárez says that the intellect recognizes that they are *ex se* non-contradictory. This amounts to the claim that by considering just what properties a real essence consists in, it can be determined that there is no incompatibility.

If this is all that is being claimed, then ILP has nothing to do with the ground or explanation of a property. At most, ILP states what explains the judgement that a real essence is logically possible. In order to know that a real essence is possible, it is sufficient to apprehend merely the abstract properties which compose the essence in question. If this is an explanation, it is of an epistemic variety; it is a far cry from a metaphysical explanation of the ‘ground’ of possibility.

There is one remaining piece of evidence which will close out this section. Contrary to the claim that logical possibility is independent of God’s productive power, it seems instead that Suárez quite

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30 I argue in section 5, however, that the foundation of non-contradiction is real. In particular, it is real as a potential being through its extrinsic cause.

31 To be ordered to the negation of another term is simply for one to exclude the other. For instance, being square excludes being circular by definition.

32 However, Doyle argues that non-contradiction is also in some sense positive. This is not true. Its foundation may be; but logical possibility in itself is not a positive property.

33 Vale recognizes that non-contradiction is *expressed* merely negatively and logically (Vale 2017: 93).

34 I thus disagree with Vale’s argument that non-contradiction is a ‘real and positive’ property (Vale 2017: 93–5). Vale acknowledges that non-contradiction is *expressed* in negative and logical terms, but he claims that our knowledge of it is nonetheless of a simple and positive property. His justification in essence is this: non-contradiction is a property of real essences; because real essences are simple and positive, so is non-contradiction. The problem with the argument is two-fold. First, DM 42.3.9 obviously contradicts his conclusion. Second, his reasoning is not sound. Subjects can be real and positive, even when their features are not. For instance, any *res* can be the subject of self-identity. Even though a *res* is real, self-identity is not. DM 54.6 says that self-identity is a relation of reason (i.e., it is not a real relation). As confirmation, consider the following:

We can explain what an essence’s being real is either by negation or by affirmation. In the first way [i.e. by negation], we say that an essence is real when it involves no impossibility in itself and is not wholly fabricated by the intellect. (DM 2.4.7; Suárez 2023: 139)

So even this way of formulating “reality” is negative. Thus, Vale’s argument doubly fails.

clearly states that logical possibility is explained by God's productive power. When elucidating some of the details about real essences and their relation to God's power, he says the following about logical possibility:

this [possibility] is not a positive mode distinct from the aforementioned [objective potency] on the part of the effect because... the objective disposition [*aptitudo*] of possible things toward existing is not on their own part, unless a certain non-repugnance also on the part of the cause denotes a potency for producing them. (DM 6.4.9; Suárez 1964: 65–6)<sup>35</sup>

He states here that an essence's logical possibility is not really distinct from its potential existence (or what he referred to in the passage as 'objective potency'). In saying that it is not really distinct, he means that logical possibility does not add anything extra-mental to potential existence. Instead, logical possibility is another way of *conceiving* potential existence. Suárez is clear elsewhere that the objective potency of a real essence is explained by its extrinsic efficient cause. This is precisely what he endorses here: a real essence's being a *possible object* of a cause is explained by the *productive power* which constitutes that cause. This has an important consequence. If logical possibility does not add to objective potency, it follows that God's power is the ultimate explanation of logical possibility. We could say, then, that logical possibility is grounded in the potency 'on the part of the cause' for producing that essence. Logical possibility is thus not explained by something distinct from God's productive power. It reduces to God's power.<sup>36</sup>

If my arguments in this section are correct, they serve as a corrective to ongoing scholarship. It turns out that previous scholarship has been rather off the mark. All four scholars that I treated earlier simply misconstrue the meaning of ILP as a claim about the explanation of logical possibility. It turns out, ILP has nothing to do with that topic. Furthermore, Doyle and Wells are thus wrong in criticizing Suárez. ILP does not contradict the thesis that real essences are simply nothing; instead, ILP states the basis of the intellect's judgment that real essences are not fabrications, because they consist of non-incompatible properties. And finally, the revisionary metaphysical theses ascribed to Suárez by Vale and Karofsky turn out to be unmotivated.

## REPLY TO AN OBJECTION

There is an important objection to my account. Karofsky argues that Suárez outright rejects the interpretation that I ascribed to him. She argues that according to DM 31.12, Suárez asserts that connections between terms, including the connection of non-contradiction between them, are not grounded in the divine productive power. To address this objection, I will outline the passages in question, unpack Karofsky's claims, and then offer a response.

DM 31.12 turns to the vexing topic of eternal truths. Suárez argues that real essences are their truth-makers. This returns him to the issue of the reality of real essences. For if real essences are the truth-makers of eternal truths, then something must be said about what their reality consists in. He argues that there are ultimately two ways to make predications about subjects. 'S is P' is asserted either by using the copula to signify actual existence (indexed to some particular time, as he adds), or by using the copula in a way that abstracts from actual existence (DM 31.12.44). He argues that predications involving real essences use the copula in the second sense. Used in this way, the connections between real essences and their essential attributes are necessary (thereby grounding eternal truths) and can be reduced to conditional claims (DM 31.12.45). For instance, the claim that 'humans are rational animals' reduces to the claim that 'if something is a human, then it is a rational animal.'

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35 '[H]unc non esse modum positivum ex parte effectus distinctum a praedictis, quia, ut dicitur inferius tractando de essentia et existentia, aptitudo obiectiva rerum possibilium ad existendum non est ex parte illarum nisi non repugnantia quaedam et ex parte causae denotat potentiam ad illas producendas.'

36 Note that logical possibility is not grounded in the way that real or existing categorial properties are grounded. Rather, it is conceptually distinct from something which is grounded in God's power. Thus, it is correct to say that logical possibility is explained by God's power, so long as this qualification is kept in mind.

Karofsky highlights Suárez's remark that conditional assertions would be true even if, *per impossibile*, there were no productive power (i.e., no creative power in God) to produce the properties signified by the subject and predicate terms. Given that real essences are the truth-makers of these claims, and given the startling assertion that conditional claims would be true even without a productive power, Karofsky infers that real essences themselves are not grounded in the divine productive power; rather, real essences are truth-makers apart from the divine power, and thus are not grounded in that power. Because their reality must be grounded in something, she thus concludes that Suárez's point must be limited to denying that a real essence's ground consists in objective being. Instead, a real essence must be identical to God's nature (Karofsky 2001: 42–3).

The problem with this interpretation, however, is that Suárez is not explaining the ground of real essences; rather, he is making a limited claim about how conditional assertions establish connections between terms. Conditional assertions establish connections between terms independently of the productive power which could produce the properties. Consider the example he uses: 'if a human is an animal, then a human can sense' (DM 31.12.45). Because *ex hypothesi* he is abstracting from all reference to actual humans and to the causes which can produce them, he must establish the necessary connection some other way. It strikes me that he is using 'animal' as a middle term and is suppressing a major premise. In other words, he is in fact providing a hypothetical syllogism: 'if S is M, and if M is P, then S is P.' That he is suppressing the major premise is indicated by his second example: 'If a rock is an animal, then a rock can sense.' This case refers to a *fabricated* essence (i.e., a being of reason), viz., a 'sensate rock.' The only reason that 'rock' is *necessarily* connected to 'sensate' is if 'animal' is a middle term and if there is a suppressed major premise, viz., 'if an animal is sensate.' As he says, the necessity of the connection between 'rock' and 'sensate' has the same force as the necessity between 'human' and 'sensate' in the previous example (DM 31.12.45). Because stones cannot really sense, and because the claim is not made with reference to any real or potential animals, there is a necessary connection only if there is an enthymeme.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the necessary connection expressed in these conditional claims is a logical connection established through the logical form of a hypothetical syllogism. This is the reason why conditionals referring to real essences and conditionals referring to mental fictions are equivalently necessary. Ontological grounding is not at issue here. Thus, Suárez is not denying that real essences or the properties which constitute them are grounded in God's productive power (Embry 2017).

## CONCLUSION

I would like to close with a brief reflection on the history of the historiography of scholasticism. Beginning in the nineteenth century, it became common for historians of philosophy to construe Suárez as an anti-Thomist of sorts. This intensified in the historical scholarship conducted by Heideggerians and neo-Thomists, who made strange bedfellows in a quixotic quest to demonize Suárez (Gilson 1949: 98ff; Siewerth 1959: 119ff; Courtine 1990: 175–180; see Schmutz 2003 for an overview of these interpretations). He began to be criticized for being a 'logician',<sup>38</sup> that is, for making logic to be more fundamental than metaphysics. It is not clear what this is supposed to mean, exactly, but the intended effect is clear: whatever Aquinas maintained about the nature of metaphysics as a science, Suárez disagreed. Aquinas took *subsisting esse* to be the ultimate explanatory principle of everything, whereas Suárez treated logical notions to be basic and even ungrounded in God.

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37 Suárez distinguishes the necessity involved in a conditional assertion 'whose truth does not depend upon an efficient cause' (to which eternal truths about real essences can reduce) from the necessity of assertions about real essences. The latter kind of assertion is distinct because an ontological ground is involved. When the necessity of a claim is founded upon an intrinsic relation of the terms—even if the terms abstract from existence—then the possibility of the real essence is in play. In these cases, 'the truth of such enunciations depends upon a cause able to effect the existence of such terms' (DM 31.12.45; Suárez 1983).

38 Even Doyle (1967), who otherwise largely corrects earlier scholarship and defends Suárez from naïve criticisms, says that Suárez's view of logical possibility 'comes close to reducing metaphysics itself to a kind of logomachy. At a very minimum, Suarezian metaphysics seems conceptualistic, concerned ultimately with what is conceivable or with "logical" possibilities' (Doyle 1967: 47).

We can see the unfortunate effects of this way of viewing Suárez in the debate just covered. Wells and Doyle argue that Suárez breaks from Aquinas by arguing that logical possibility is not based in God's power. In doing so, they judge that he ran into philosophical (and theological) difficulties. Vale and Karofsky agree that Suárez breaks with Aquinas in some way, though they suggest that he departs from Thomas in more ways than one. Rather than faulting him for error, they in fact take these developments to be historical advancements in philosophical thinking.

I have found that something far less interesting is closer to the truth. It does not seem that Suárez deviates from Aquinas' account of logical possibility. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas argues that the logical possibility of created essences is ultimately explained by God's power.<sup>39</sup> The justification of this claim is rather intricate, but it boils down to the following argument: the proper object of God's power is being, and because being is the opposite of non-being, it entails that God's power's object does not contradict being. Thus, God's power is the basis of non-contradiction (Kretzmann 1998: 113–7).

As we saw in the passage from *Metaphysical Disputation 6* quoted above, Suárez also explains logical possibility in terms of God's productive power: 'this [logical possibility] is not a positive mode distinct from the aforementioned [objective potency] on the part of the effect' (DM 6.4.9; Suárez 1964: 65). Because logical possibility is not really distinct from objective potency, and because an essence's objective potency is explained by its extrinsic efficient cause, this entails that logical possibility is explained through an essence's extrinsic efficient cause. And so, God's productive power is the ultimate explanation of the logical possibility which an intellect attributes to an essence. Suárez thus turns out to hew rather closely to Aquinas' view: the logical possibility of possible creatures is ultimately grounded in God's power to produce them.<sup>40</sup>

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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39 See *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2.22.983, translated in Kretzmann (1998).

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