

SUAREZ ON THE EXTERNALITY AND INTERNALITY OF RELATIONS

The early twentieth century conflict between British realism and post-Hegelian idealism resulted in a spirited but today almost forgotten debate on the internality or externality of relation¹. Although couched in a peculiar terminology, the debate was basically a confrontation between an empiricist and a rationalist theory of knowledge as they both bear upon the philosophically central problem of relations.

The claim that all relations are external was generally understood to mean that the related terms are not what are in virtue of their being related to each other. Classical empiricism, as tentatively formulated by Locke and radically presented by Hume, proceeded on the assumption that the task of philosophy is not to unveil the true nature of things but rather to describe the way they are experienced by minds. Empiricists, for the most part, assumed also that the data of experience are critically perceived as isolated units and only later related to one another by a subsequent and active operation of the mind. Relations are not given in experience but arise from an imaginative articulation of the material passively received through the senses. Even those relations which, as Hume says, «depend entirely upon the ideas themselves», are «external» in the sense that they are not components of the reality we perceive but rather the ingredients of our manner of perceiving reality. Hume invited the extreme conventionalism and instrumentalism of some contemporary analytic philosophers by denying also that particulars are ontological bearers of properties. The relation between a particular and its properties becomes «external» in the stronger sense that particulars themselves are nothing but bundles of perceptions put together according to the way our experience is shaped by the sentiments, forces, and habits of the perceiving mind. Contemporary analytic philosophers merely translate Hume into linguistic terms. A given description of a given particular is never privileged or revealing, but always logically arbitrary and conditioned by the interests and purposes of those who make the description. Even the common sense and Aristotelian distinction between essential and accidental properties is given a pragmatic character without any ontological or «internal» justification.

The counterclaim that all relations are internal roughly meant that the related terms are what they are in virtue of their being related to

¹ The controversy and related bibliography are well presented by R. M. Rorty in 'Relations, Internal and External', *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, P. Edwards ed. (New York 1967).