Chapter 5: “Suárez on Propinquity and the Efficient Cause”

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The theory of the efficient cause in late Aristotelianism includes what can be called various “formal characters”. These are features of the causal relation that can be defined independently of claims about the nature of causality, e.g. whether or not it involves a “necessary connection” between cause and effect.

Among the formal characters standardly treated in disputations on the efficient cause is that of whether the cause must be “propinquitous” to the effect. If not, then *actio in distans* is possible. Suárez, in agreement with Aquinas and his followers, and contrary to Scotus and his followers, holds that action at a distance is impossible. The interest in his discussion lies in not so much in the position he takes as in his account of how causes act on things remote from them—that is, of how causes act through media. The issue is of interest not only in its own right but because Descartes’ reduction of physical interaction to collision may have been motivated in part by his realization that the troublesome issues one sees Suárez grappling with disappear if all action is by way of immediate impact.