



The Role of Negation in Human Knowledge

Charles R. MacDonald

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The Role of Negation in Human Knowledge

I. THE NEGATIVE ENUNTIATION

As we approach the question of negation we are immediately faced with the problem of deciding, in the case of a term which has many meanings, what order is to be followed in treating the various significations of the term. Since the term, "negation," appears in each of the traditional divisions of philosophy, our most reasonable starting point would seem to be the consideration of negation as used in Logic to signify a particular second intention.

In Logic negation is primarily taken as a division of the enuntiation, a division opposed to affirmation. In this sense negation is said to be an enuntiation in which a predicate is separated from a subject.¹ This division of the enuntiation into negation and affirmation corresponds to a division of the operation of the intelligence composing and dividing. The intelligence is said to compose when it joins a predicate to a subject. It is said to divide when it conceives the predicate as disjoined from the subject and makes an enuntiation, expressed in a negation, to indicate this separation or division.

Our first question, then, with regard to the necessity of negation, will bear on this process of composition and division which results in the affirmative or negative enuntiation. The clue to the answer is expressed in a few words by St. Thomas :

As in the intellect, when reasoning, the conclusion is compared to the principle, so in the intellect composing and dividing the predicate is compared to the subject. For if our intellect were to see at once the truth of the conclusion in the principle, it would never understand by discursion and reasoning. In like manner, if the intellect, in apprehending the whatness of the subject, were at once to have knowledge of all that can be attributed to, or removed from, the subject, it would never understand by composing and dividing, but only by understanding the essence. Thus it is evident that for the self-same reason our intellect understands by discursion, and by composing and dividing, namely, that in the first apprehension of anything it cannot at once grasp all that is virtually contained within it. And this comes from the weakness of the intellectual light in us . . .²

1. *In I Periherm.*, lect.8, n.21. Where reference is made to the writings of St. Thomas no author is named.

2. *Ia*, q.58, a.4, c.

The necessity of composition and division, and the resulting affirmation and negation, is seen here to be a consequence of the weakness of the human intellect. This weakness of the intellectual light in us is further explained by St. Thomas as deriving from the potentiality of the intellect which obliges it to pass from imperfect to perfect knowledge :

The human intellect must of necessity understand by composition and division. For since the intellect passes from potentiality to act, it has a likeness to generable things, which do not acquire perfection all at once but by degrees. In the same way the human intellect does not acquire perfect knowledge of a thing by the first apprehension ; but it first apprehends something of the thing, that is, what it is, which is the first and proper object of the intellect ; and then it understands the properties, accidents, and the various dispositions affecting the essence. Thus it is obliged to relate one apprehension to another by composition and division, and then to proceed from one composition or division to another, and this is reasoning.¹

It is due to the fact that the human intellect, when it apprehends what a thing is, does not apprehend all that pertains to what the thing is, that it must compose and divide, and, consequently, form enuntiations. This means that when, by simple apprehension, I grasp the quiddity of any object of knowledge, there remain many predicates that can be said, or denied, of this original object that are not grasped in the first concept. My first knowledge is incomplete, and can be rendered more complete only by a process which involves the formation of other concepts, their comparison with the original one, and a consequent judgment by which these concepts are united or separated. This is the procedure from imperfect to more perfect, from potency to act, as seen in the formation of the enuntiation.

St. Thomas clarifies the connection between the formation of enuntiations and the potentiality of the intellect by a comparison with angelic knowledge :

... as the angel does not understand by reasoning, so neither does it by composing and dividing.²

But when an angel apprehends what a thing is, he at the same time understands whatever can be attributed to it or denied of it. Hence, in apprehending the essence, by one simple perception he grasps all that we can learn by composing and dividing.³

The fundamental reason for this is that

the intellect of the angel is never in potency with regard to the things to which its natural knowledge extends.⁴

1. *Ia*, q.85, a.5, c.

2. *Ia*, q.58, a.4, c.

3. *Ibid.*, ad 1.

4. *Ibid.*, a.1, c.

... In the truths which they know naturally, they at once behold all things whatsoever that can be known in them.¹

Because of the lack of any passage from potency to act in the angelic intellect, there is an absence, as well, of any composition or division. The same situation prevails *a fortiori*, as to the manner of knowing, in the case of divine knowledge :

God knows everything by simple intelligence, by understanding what each thing is ; just as if we, from the fact that we understood what man is, would understand all the things that can be predicated of man. This, however, does not happen in the case of our intellect, which proceeds from one thing to another, because the intelligible species represents one thing in such a way that it does not represent another. So, by understanding what man is, we do not from this understand other things which belong to him immediately, but only according to a certain succession . . . Hence, by understanding His essence, God knows the essences of all things, and also whatever can happen to them.²

Our intellect therefore, composes and divides because in the concept of one simple thing it does not see all that can be attributed to, or denied of, that thing. By one concept it grasps the subject of which something is said, and by another what is said of the subject or denied of it, and from both concepts it forms an enuntiation. It is not the multiplicity of species in the intellect that is alone responsible for the necessity of forming affirmations and negations, for such a multiplicity exists in the intellect of the angel. It is rather the discourse that is necessary to acquire a complete knowledge of one thing, and discourse requires not only that several things be known by distinct concepts, but that the knowledge of one be the cause of the knowledge of the other.³ We move from the manifestation of one thing to the manifestation of another. The intellect that composes and divides sees and understands one extreme, or term, of the enuntiation without immediately seeing in it all that belongs to it or is excluded from it. And so, it needs distinct knowledge of other terms which can then be compared to the first so as to see the suitability or non-suitability of such predicates for such a subject. Discourse is thus required, not because an intellect uses several species, but because it depends on a comparison of these species to have complete knowledge of the thing represented by one or

1. *Ibid.*, a.3, c.

2. *Ia*, q.14, a.14, c. These comparisons of human knowledge to angelic or divine knowledge are not to be taken as implying that the latter are more known to us and can thus serve to manifest our own manner of knowing. It is rather a question of making the imperfection of our manner of knowing clear by denying of it a superior perfection. It is a case of knowledge by negation.

3. Cf. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Cursus Theologicus*, Vives edition, vol.IV, d.22, a.4, n.2, pp.846-847.

the other of them. It is this comparison that manifests to us the truth of the judgment. This truth, at which we arrive by a comparison of concepts, is achieved in divine and angelic knowledge by a simple intuition which penetrates not only to the essence of the thing but to all the predicates of which it is susceptible.

If we take, for example, the negation : "Man is not a stone," we see that the justification for such a negation is the comparison we have made between the two distinctly known concepts, "man" and "stone." It is not necessary that we have complete quidditative knowledge of each extreme, but only that our knowledge be sufficient to allow us to see a repugnance in the identification of the things represented by these two concepts. This repugnance is made clear by the comparison ; by comparing one with the other we come to know the truth of their non-identity. The negation thus represents for us an advance from imperfect towards more perfect knowledge. To be sure, the knowledge that "man" is "a being which is not a stone" does not represent a noteworthy contribution to our knowledge of "man," but the point is that it does indicate an advance, "for we know anything more perfectly the more we grasp its differences from other things."¹

As Sylvester of Ferrara puts it :

Although a negation does not pertain intrinsically to the essence of a thing, . . . yet this mode of knowing causes us to approach to the proper knowledge of a nature, because a negation restricts the nature of the known thing . . .²

It is not to be thought that negation and affirmation are made use of only after the whatness or essence has been understood. We arrive at the knowledge of the whatness itself by the use of a discourse which involves the formation of enuntiations. There is an excellent example of this discourse, especially as it applies to negation, in the process used by Aristotle to arrive at the real, or essential, definition of the soul.³ Beginning with a nominal definition of the soul as "an intrinsic principle of life," he proceeds to make a number of divisions⁴ pertaining to what the soul is and the subject in which it resides. From the broadest division, that of being into the ten categories, he moves, by way of elimination, towards more and more restricted divisions, until eventually he arrives at the specific difference of the whatness and subject of the soul. Although the divisions

1. *Cont. Gent.*, I, c.14.

2. SYLVESTER OF FERRARA, *Comment. in I Cont. Gent.*, c.14.

3. ARISTOTLE, *De Anima*, II, c.1.

4. The divisions are insinuated rather than explicit. Cf. ST. THOMAS, *In II de Anima*, lect.1, edit. Pirota, n.214.

are given first and the application made later, yet, the very choice of the terms to be divided implies that the elimination has already been anticipated. In the divisions prerequisite for the discovery of what the soul is, for example, after he has stated the division of being into the ten categories, he proceeds to the division of substance into matter, form, and composite, without any further consideration of the categories of accidents. In other words, the nominal definition already given permits the elimination of the categories other than substance, and this elimination, or negation, is the first step towards a definition. By a series of negations of this type Aristotle finally arrives at the real definition of the soul.

In this example it is clear how a process of successive negations can serve to bring us to the understanding of what a thing is, provided, of course, that the negations succeed one another in an orderly manner; for since of any subject an infinity of predicates can be negated, without order we would never arrive at a final definition. The formation of these negations is seen as a form of discourse by which we pass from incomplete to more complete knowledge, or from potency to act in the knowledge of a particular nature.¹

A more convincing proof of the dependence of the mind on negation by reason of its potentiality is seen in the universal process of the mind, which has as its starting point the most confused knowledge and as its ultimate term the more distinct. This passage from confused to distinct, or, in other words, from the more universal to the less universal, is consequent upon the necessity of proceeding from the more known towards the less known, a process that is very obviously characteristic of an intellect which is first in potency and later in act with regard to its object.² As a result of the necessity of such a process, the first predicates that we will be able to join to any particular subject will be the most universal and confused. And so it is that the very first predicate, the *primum cognitum*, is being; not the being of total abstraction, and far less the being of formal abstraction, but being as the most confused predicate, which does not prescind from the nature involved, but attains in that nature only what is most universal, common, and vague.³ In this confused knowledge our intellect knows of a thing simply that it is.⁴ This concept of being is the most imperfect, precisely because

1. The word, "nature," will be used in the remainder of this chapter to signify "quiddity," or "essence," or the "whatness" of a thing. This is the meaning of nature referred to by St. Thomas as the second adjunct mode of signifying of this word. Cf. *In V Metaph.*, lect.5; also *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, c.25: "...Extensum est nomen naturae ad significandum essentiam cuiuscumque rei in natura existentia: ut sic natura alicuius rei dicatur essentia quam significat definitio."

2. Cf. *In I Phys.*, lect.1, n.6, sqq.; *In VII Metaph.*, lect.2, edit. Marietti, n.1303.

3. Cf. CAJETAN, *In de Ente et Essentia*, q.1.

4. Cf. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Cursus Philosophicus*, edit. Reiser, vol.II, 2868-29a38.

most confused and indistinct, and, consequently, it is most appropriate for an intellect which begins with the most imperfect knowledge and proceeds only gradually to perfect and distinct knowledge. We are speaking here of intellectual knowledge only, but the same process from the more confused, or universal, to the more distinct, or particular, can be observed also in sense knowledge, where we first have knowledge of the most confused type, and only on closer inspection does our sense discern more distinctly the sensible qualities.¹

However, if the first judgment made by the intellect is an affirmation of being, the second is a negation :

So, what first comes to the intellect is being ; secondly, that this being is not that being, and thus we apprehend division as a consequence ; thirdly comes the notion of one ; fourthly, the notion of multitude.²

Division is the cause of multitude and is prior to multitude according to our understanding ; for unity is as a privation with respect to division, since it is undivided being, but it is not [a privation] in relation to multitude. Hence, division is prior to unity according to the reason, but multitude is posterior. Which is clear from the fact that the first thing which comes to the intellect is being, the second the negation of being ; and from these two follows, thirdly, the understanding of division, for from the fact that something is understood to be being, and not to be this [other] being, it follows that it is divided from this (other) in the understanding ; fourthly, there follows in the intellect the notion of unity, insofar, namely, as this being is understood not to be divided in itself ; fifthly, there follows the understanding of multitude, insofar as this being is understood as divided from every other and each of them one in itself.³

In the list of the very first things we understand, then, negation holds the second place. It could not be the first thing understood, of course,

For a negation or a privation cannot be the first thing conceived by the intellect, since that which is negated or removed is always of the notion of the negation or privation.⁴

But if we list the first five things understood according to the order of their priority in the intellect, then, in line with the above explanation we have : being, the negation of being, division, unity, multitude.

So, in the order of generation of knowledge, there is a negation that precedes any knowledge of a determined nature. Our first knowledge of the nature is the confused knowledge we have of it in the predicate, "being." This is in the beginning the *quod quid*

1. Cf. *In I Phys.*, lect.1, n.11.

2. *Ia*, q.11, a.2, ad 4.

3. *De Pot.*, q.9, a.7, ad 15.

4. *Ibid.*, ad 6.

est of the object known, as far as the intellect, in its first step towards distinct knowledge, can grasp it. There follows in the intellect the negation by which it knows "that this is not that." Although we are told that the first operation of the intellect is the *intelligentia indivisibilium*, we are not to understand that we arrive at the distinct knowledge of what a thing is by an intuition of it in its unity without any previous knowledge. For the very understanding of what it is to be undivided, or one, is based on a previous division, and this latter on a negation.

As a matter of fact, if a thing be completely indivisible, that is, in no way susceptible of division, we cannot understand it as it is in itself but are all the more obliged to resort to negation. In the *De Anima*,¹ when he speaks of the understanding of indivisible things, Aristotle explains three ways in which a thing may be indivisible, or one :

a) By continuity : what is continuous is indivisible insofar as it is not divided in act, although divisible in potency. The intellect can grasp as indivisible (that is, undivided) what is divisible in potency, as when it understands a line without understanding separately the parts of the line.

b) In species : what is composed of parts, even discontinuous parts, may be understood as one in species, as man, house, or army.

c) But when it comes to something which is in no way divisible, that is, not only undivided in act, but not susceptible of division, like the point and the instant, such must be made known to the intellect *sicut privatio*. St. Thomas explains this inability to grasp what is in every way indivisible as arising from the dependence of the intellect on the senses :

The reason for this is that our intellect takes [its knowledge] from the senses ; and so, those things first come to the apprehension of our intellect which are sensible ; and things of this kind have magnitude. Thus the point and unity are defined only negatively. This is also the reason that whatever transcends these sensible things known to us are not known by us except through negation ; so, in the case of separated substances we know that they are immaterial and incorporeal, and so on.²

In another text ³ St. Thomas concludes from the above enumeration of the various kinds of indivisibles that the indivisible is understood before its division into parts, where such division is possible. In the first two cases, that of the continuous and the indivisible in species, the indivisible is understood before its division into its parts, "and also before the intellect composes and divides by affirmation

1. ARISTOTLE, *De Anima*, III, c.6, 430 b 6-b 26.

2. In *III de Anima*, lect.11, n.758.

3. Cf. *Ia*, q.85, a.8, c.

and negation." The reason for this priority is "that both these kinds of indivisible are understood by the intellect of itself, as its proper object." The third kind of indivisible, which is not divided either actually or potentially, is known secondarily, through the privation of divisibility. And the reason for this posteriority is "that this indivisible has a certain opposition to corporeal being, the nature of which is the proper and primary object of the intellect."

What is first of all clear from these texts is our dependence on negation to know those indivisible things that are not in any way susceptible of division. What may not be clear is the dependence of our intellect on negation for the understanding of sensible *species specialissimae*, which are the proper object of the intellect. This latter dependence may be better understood if we consider a precision made by John of St. Thomas in reply to an objection put forward against the principle that *confusiora sunt nobis notiora*.¹ It is objected that intuitive knowledge always precedes abstractive knowledge, even in the intellect, because the intellect is first moved by an object that is present rather than by one that is absent, the absent one being then known *ad instar alicujus praesentis*. What is known intuitively is not more confused, but rather clearer, than what is known by abstraction. So, it would seem that *confusiora non sunt nobis notiora*. In replying to this objection John of St. Thomas admits that intuitive knowledge precedes abstractive knowledge in the intellect as well as in the senses, but the first intuitive knowledge we have is most imperfect, conveying as it does the least in the line of distinction,

for in intuitive knowledge itself there are degrees, and some is more perfect than some other, as is clear when we see something from afar, without distinguishing in particular what it is ; here there is intuitive knowledge on y as to the fact that a thing is. Thus the intellect, in its first knowledge sees what is proposed to it as if from afar in the genus of intelligible things, even though the object be present (physically) ; and so this intuitive knowledge attains in the object only the *ipsum esse*, or that the thing is, and is thus imperfectly intuitive and accompanied by complete confusion as to the whatness and the distinct predicates.

We are again obliged to admit the necessity of proceeding towards the distinct knowledge of any sensible nature by way of a series of negations and affirmations (the first negation being the one that follows immediately the intuitive knowledge that the thing is, as has already been explained). These successive affirmations and negations serve to narrow our understanding of a particular object, rendering our knowledge of it more and more definite and distinct.

It might be objected that negations cannot serve to make our knowledge more distinct, since they do not add to our knowledge

1. Cf. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *loc. cit.*

of a particular object. For, in the first place, every negation is based on an affirmation,¹ so that in order to form a negative enuntiation I must already have formed the affirmative one on which it depends, and thus the negation would not tell me any more about the nature of the subject that I already know through the affirmation. Secondly, in order to contract a notion it would seem that we must add to it, since the notion becomes more determined as its comprehension is increased. But in a negation, rather than adding a note to the subject, we seem to remove something from it, and so the negation would not seem to be a suitable means of approaching more distinct knowledge.

It is true that a negation which is said of some real being is based on something existing in this being which is incompatible with what is denied of it.² For example, we can say that man is not a horse, because his nature is incompatible with the nature of horse. But it is not necessary that the one knowing the negation have distinct knowledge of the affirmation on which the negation is based ; that is, he can know the negation without knowing clearly the nature which is incompatible with what is denied. Obviously I may be able to say of something that it is not an animal, without being able to say what it is in itself. Having distinct knowledge of what is required in order to be animal, and seeing the absence of these requirements in a particular object, I have sufficient knowledge to permit me to make the negation. Although "affirmation is prior to negation,"³ and although an affirmation, since it posits something, is more knowable in itself than a negation, yet the negation may be more known *quoad nos*. This is again the result of the insufficiency of our intellect, and it appears especially in our knowledge of God.

In reply to the second objection, which would have it that negations do not contract, or narrow down, a notion, because they do not add anything to the subject but rather remove something from it, there is a distinction to be made. Some negations are such that they do contract a notion ; others are not. Suppose, for example, that in my knowledge of a particular object, let us call it A, I have reached the point where I can say that it is a brute animal. If, at this point, I form the negation, "A is not risible," the negation does nothing to contract the notion I already have of A, since, in my knowledge of it as a brute animal, I already have knowledge of it as not risible. But if, on the contrary, knowing A only as brute animal, I am then further able to say of it that it is not a lion, my notion of A is thereby contracted. This is so because the notion of brute animal, as such, is susceptible of being determined by a

1. Cf. *Ia IIae*, q.72, a.6, c.

2. SYLVESTER OF FERRARA, *loc. cit.*

3. *Ila IIae*, q.122, a.2, ad 1 ; *In I Periherm.*, lect.8, n.3 sqq.

variety of differences, one of which is that which constitutes a lion ; in denying lion of A I therefore limit the potentiality of the notion and render it more explicit. The negation of lion, in this case, has more the nature of a privation than of a simple negation. And although "not to be a lion" does not add anything to A in the order of reality it does add something to the understanding I have of A.

To explain the power of negation to contract a notion it is necessary to introduce the distinction between simple negation and privation. This distinction is to be elucidated more fully in the next chapter, and to see its relevance to the present context it will suffice to grasp the broad lines of the distinction as they are presented in the following passage from St. Thomas' *Commentary on Metaph. IV* :

Negation is twofold : one is simple, which states absolutely that this is not in that. Another is negation in a genus, by which something is not denied absolutely, but within the limits of some genus ; as 'blind' is said not simply of that which does not have sight, but within the genus of animal which is apt to have sight. . . . because a negation tells only of the absence of something, namely, of that which it removes, without determining any subject. Whence, an absolute negation can be verified both of nonbeing, which is [not] apt to have the affirmation, and of being, which is apt to have [the affirmation] and does not have it. For 'not-seeing' can be said of a chimera and of a stone as well as of man. But in the case of a privation, there is a certain nature or determined substance, of which the privation is said ; for not every nonseeing thing can be called 'blind' but only that which is apt to have sight. And so, since the negation which is included in the notion of 'unity' is a negation in a subject, . . . it is obvious that 'unity' differs from absolute negation and is closer to the nature of privation.¹

The generic notion is conceived of as a potentiality with respect to certain specific differences, and so, a negation within the genus, since it eliminates one of these differences, limits the potentiality of the generic notion in some measure, leading in this way to a more distinct and determined notion. This limitation would not be brought about by an absolute negation, whose extension is far greater than that of the genus itself (for example, if one were to say : "Brutes are non-men," where "non-men" is an infinite name predicable of many things besides brutes) ; nor would it be brought about by a negation co-extensive with the genus (v.g., "Brutes are animals which are non-rational.")

Speaking of the manner in which a negation adds to the knowledge of an object, St. Thomas includes it in an enumeration of the ways in which one thing can add to another, under a special heading :

1. In *IV Metaph.*, lect.3, n.565. There is obviously an error in this text as it is found in the accepted editions of the *Metaphysica*. The sense demands the negative particle which is given here in brackets near the center of the quotation.

In a third way something is said to add to another according to the reason only ; namely, when something is of the notion of one and not of the notion of the other. This is nothing in the order of reality, but only in the reason, whether through it that to which it is said to be added is contracted or not. For 'blind' adds something to man, namely 'blindness,' which is not some being in nature, but only of the reason, insofar as being includes privations. And through this man is contracted, for not ever man is blind. But when we speak of a 'blind mole' no contraction is made through this addition.¹

It is because 'blindness' represents a privation of something that man is suited to have that the notion of man is contracted, or narrowed, by the addition of the note, 'blind.' This is a case of negation in an apt subject. In a similar way, our general notions can be considered apt in regard to the determinations of which they are susceptible. The notion, 'animal,' for example, is apt to be determined indifferently by the differences, 'rational' and 'irrational,' or the notion, 'figure' (geometrical), by the differences, 'regular' and 'irregular,' and if one of them can be denied in a particular case, then the negation is obviously of the nature of a privation and is thus capable of contracting the notion we have of the object and rendering our knowledge more explicit. So, in our progress from confused to more distinct knowledge, negations can play a very important role ; not any negations at all, but negations which proceed according to a certain order and remain within the limits of the genus involved at each particular stage of determination. An example of such an orderly use of negation has already been seen in the description of Aristotle's method of arriving at the real definition of the soul.

The utility of the use of negation as a means of approaching distinct knowledge will appear more especially in the case of an object which demands such an approach, as is the case for objects which transcend the proper object of the human intellect. But since the approach has validity and utility even for sensible objects, the foregoing observations are only confirmed by the fruitfulness of the negative method in theology.

For just as [in the case of] affirmative differences one contracts another and comes nearer to the complete designation of a thing according as it makes it differ from more things ; so also, one negative difference is contracted by another which makes it differ from more things. Thus, if we say that God is not an accident, by this He is made distinct from all accidents ; if we then add that He is not a body, we distinguish Him from other substances ; and thus, by negations of this kind He is distinguished, according to a certain order, from all that is outside of Him.²

1. *De Ver.*, q.21, a.2, c. The ancients considered the mole ("talpa") to be totally lacking in sight. The example is used in the same sense in many other texts.

2. *Cont. Gent.*, I, c.14.

The point is succinctly made by St. Thomas in the *De Trinitate* :

And the more negations we know of them [i.e., immaterial substances] the less confused is our knowledge of them ; because through successive negations the prior negation is contracted and determined, just as a remote genus is contracted by differences.¹

So far we have been concerned with showing the dependence of the mind on negation because of the weakness of the intellectual light in man. The lowest in the order of intelligences is obliged to acquire knowledge by way of discourse, passing from a state of potency to one of act. This passage has, as its first step, a type of knowledge which is most confused, and only gradually approaches distinct knowledge, both with regard to a particular sensible nature, and also with regard to the various predicates of which this nature can be subject. This discourse of the intellect has been shown to include the formation of certain enuntiations, affirmative and negative, enuntiations in which, by reason of a previous comparison, the intelligence either composes or divides a subject and a predicate.

We have not attempted to make any judgement as to the relative worth of one or the other type of enuntiation in the progress of the mind towards complete knowledge, but we have shown that the formation of negation is not only of some use to the intellect, but even imposes itself at certain stages. It has been insinuated also that the necessity of negation derives, in some cases, not precisely from the weakness of the intelligence, but rather from the object of which knowledge is sought. Up to this point, however, we have not insisted on the role of the object in making negations a necessary element of knowledge. There can be no adequate consideration of the intelligence, of course, without a consideration of its object, for a potency is constituted in its specific nature by its proper object. A consideration of the object of human knowledge ought, then, to throw some light on the dependence of the intellect on negation, as well as on the intrinsic character of negation and its value in the real, as opposed to the intentional order.

Approaching this problem from the point of view of the object of knowledge, we shall consider how negation is made necessary by the imperfect character of the object of the intelligence.

II. NEGATION IN THE ORDER OF REALITY

The negation as an enuntiation is a second intention which is the product of an act of the mind dividing a predicate from a subject. As is the case for all second intentions, the root and justification of this division is to be found on the side of reality. An act of the

1. In *Boeth. de Trin.*, q.6, a.3.

mind does not posit anything in the order of extra-mental reality, but merely reveals what is found there. We can expect to find in the real order, then, as a foundation of the negative enuntiation, not predicates separated from subjects, but real beings, as represented by the subject, lacking certain forms, as represented by the predicate.

... the external thing which is signified by the affirmation or negation ... is a thing to which is joined what is affirmed of it, or to which is not joined [what is denied].¹

It is by no means to be understood from this that a real being can be assigned to every subject and every predicate of every enuntiation. We can form enuntiations, affirmative and negative, of terms that signify beings of the reason. But without going into the distinction between a real negation and a negation of the reason, that is, formed by the reason (a distinction that will be explained later in this chapter), let us say for the present that where the subject represents a real being, the form which is denied of it in the negative enuntiation will be absent from it in reality. In other words, it is not the mind which is responsible for the fact that Socrates, for example, is "not sitting." The negative enuntiation merely represents what is a real situation. The enuntiation, it is true, is a second intention; it is formed by the mind which relates predicate to subject; but in the order of reality and independently of any consideration of the mind, this particular accidental form is absent from Socrates at the moment that the enuntiation is made.

So it is with many other negations. They have an objective (in the sense of extra-mental) value whether or not there be any mind considering. Such is the type of negation that we will speak of in this chapter. It will be necessary to make several distinctions in connection with this type of negation, distinctions whose import may not be immediately evident, but which are a clue to the understanding of difficulties that result from the failure of some philosophers of moment to grasp these distinctions. We pass, then, from negation as the product of an act of the mind to a negation as something real. To speak of a negation as "something real," or as a "reality," may bring an objection from the reader. He will admit that we can form out of a negation a being of the reason, and thus consider it as *quoddam ens*, as St. Thomas explains in many texts;² but we must insist that we are not concerned as yet with negation as such a being, since we have restricted our consideration to the status of negation prior to any mental operation. The elevation of negation

1. CAJETAN, *In Praedicamenta Aristotelis*, edit. Laurent, p.214.

2. Cf. *In II Periherm.*, lect.2 and 3; *Ia IIae*, q.8, a.1, ad 3; *In IV Metaph.*, lect.1, n.540; *De Ver.*, q.1, a.1, ad 7.

to the level of a being of the reason will have to enter into the picture later, when we explain how negations are known.

Even though it is in reality nothing but the non-being of something, we can justify our speaking of negation as a kind of being by reason of a certain analogy it has with positive things, to the extent that a negation does not depend on a fiction of the mind. The fact that it is had independently of the mind can only be expressed by saying that the negation *is* in the thing ; and if, by speaking of it in this way, we automatically, as it were, tend to form of it a being of the reason, then we shall simply have to be on our guard and recognize this additional value that the mind confers on what is really non-being.

As a matter of fact, when we pass from the consideration of negation as a kind of enunciation to the examination of negation as found in the real order, a multitude of complications plagues us. The meanings and applications of the term multiply, and confusions abound. For while there is little likelihood of our identifying a second intention, like an enunciation, with anything of an extra-mental character, in the case of our present consideration the ground is far more treacherous ; and while insisting on the role that negation plays in the development of human knowledge we must, at the same time, avoid overemphasizing the value to be allotted to real negation.

The manner in which the term "being" can be extended to negation, excluding the case of the being of the reason, is explained by St. Thomas as follows :

Being is said in two ways : in one way as signifying the nature of the ten genera ; and in this way neither evil nor any privation is a being or anything. In another way as replying to the question 'is it?' And in this way evil is, and blindness is. But evil is not something, because to be something signifies that one can reply not only to the question 'is it?' but also to the question 'what is it?'.¹

Negation, therefore, *is* in things, even though in things it is not anything but the absence of something.

Were we to speak of negation only as a being of the reason we would be using somewhat the same approach as in the first chapter, where we dealt with negation as a necessary instrument of the intelligence in its attempt to acquire knowledge. Here our approach is not precisely from the viewpoint of a need on the part of the intelligence, but rather of a condition imposed by the object itself. It must be repeated, then, that although our purpose is still to explain the necessity of negation for human knowledge, what is presently to be explained is the foundation in reality for both the negative enunciation already discussed and for the being of the reason we call negation.

1. *De Malo*, q.1, a.1, ad 19.

That we have knowledge of such an absence of being as negation presents a problem in itself, since all knowledge is through form or act,¹ and negation is precisely the absence of form or act ; so that "non-being does not have knowability in itself."² Regardless, however, of what mental operations are required for the apprehension of negation, the extra-mental character of the negation is not thereby affected. Ultimately it will be the negation as it is in the object, independently of our consideration of it, that will be found to be at the root of all these difficulties, and it is to this negation that we must have recourse for the principles that will open the way to a solution of them. Such a negation we shall call "physical," or "objective" so as to distinguish it from the negative enuntiation and also from negation as a being of the reason.

In undertaking the study of this physical negation, we are faced at the start with the necessity of making a number of distinctions. The problem as to where to begin is solved, in a way, by the fact that reference has already been made to a particular kind of negation, called above "privation." This particular type of negation is, furthermore, the most important in the present context, and a detailed explanation of the meaning of privation, as well as of its relation to negation in general, would seem to be called for without delay.

Privation is but one of the four types of opposition, all of which imply a negation because all imply a basic contradiction.

... There are four ways in which things can be opposed : one is contradiction, as sitting is opposed to not-sitting ; another is privation, as blind to seeing ; a third way is contrariety, as black to white ; and a fourth way relation, as son to father ; among these four kinds of opposition the first is contradiction. ... because of the very notion of one opposite is the negation of the other.³

It should be clear from this, then, that of the two terms, "negation" and "privation," negation is the wider term, for it is simply the absence, or removal, of some form or act ; in short, the absence of being.⁴ This is the first sense of the term, "negation," described by John of St. Thomas in the following passage :

And these negations can be considered in two states : firstly, as they are in reality, where they do not posit anything, but remove something, and imply only an opposition to form ; secondly, as they are in our intellect, which conceives these negations in the likeness of some being and positive form.⁵

1. *IIIa*, q.10, a.3, ad 1.

2. *Ia*, q.16, a.3, ad 2.

3. *In X Metaph.*, lect.6, nn.2040-2041.

4. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Curs. Theol.*, Desclée edit., vol.II, d.18, a.4, n.5, *bis*, p.394.

5. *Ibid.*, n.4.

Taking the negation in the first sense, *prout se habet in re*, which is precisely the physical negation of which we are speaking, we can make a further distinction between a negation which indicates the complete absence of being, as pure nothing — *quod nullo modo est*¹ — *pure non-ens*² — and a negation that signifies the absence of some particular form but does not necessarily remove entirely all being. As examples of the first type we may think of what is inherently contradictory, or impossible, as well as what we understand by “nothing,” when we say that God made the world out of “nothing.” The second type is susceptible of variations. When it is said that this type does not *necessarily* remove all being, the implication is that, like the first type, it *may* indicate the absence of all being. If we take, in this connection, the case of the infinite name these possibilities become clear.

A term like “non-man” is called an infinite name because, although it signifies the absence of a determined nature, it does not signify the existence of any determined nature, and so, it can be said of innumerable things, of everything, in fact, but man.³ Indeed, “it is said equally of being and non-being.”⁴ We can say of a horse that it is non-man, of a color that it is non-man, and even of what is absolutely non-being that it is non-man. This type of negation, then, although indicating in itself the absence of a particular form, may be said of what has no existence whatsoever. Such a negation is sometimes called, by St. Thomas, an absolute negation,⁵ but it is obviously more broad than what he calls *pure non-ens*, since the infinite name, besides its ability to represent *quod nullo modo est*, has the capacity to represent also real beings, as long as they are outside the nature negated. That is, we can predicate non-being only of what does not exist at all, but we can predicate an infinite name both of what does not exist at all and of all existents except that particular nature that the infinite name negates.

We come now to a third type of negation,⁶ one that, while removing being, demands, nevertheless, that being be not entirely removed, but that some real subject remain of which the negation is verified. This negation in a subject is called a “privation,” and is distinct from both *pure non-ens* (since it requires some being as a subject),

1. *In XII Metaph.*, lect.2, n.2437.

2. *Ia IIae*, q.64, a.3, ad 3.

3. *In I Periherm.*, lect.4, n.13.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *In IV Metaph.*, lect.3, nn.565 sqq.

6. This division of negation is not found in St. Thomas exactly as given. In most texts where a division is made St. Thomas enumerates merely two members, *negatio simplex*, and *negatio in genere*; or, again, *negatio* and *privatio*. In our division is summarized what appears to be insinuated in various such texts, and a similar division is found in John of St. Thomas, *Curs. Theol.*, Desclée edit., vol.II, d.18, a.4, n.20, p.401.

and from the negation signified by the infinite name (since it requires a determined subject).¹ Privation, then, is the absence of some determined form in some determined subject. It is indeed a negation, and not something positive, but it implies the positing in reality of some being, namely, the subject of the privation.

Privation itself is divisible into many species, and to complete our schema of negation these divisions must be considered.

Privation is said in many ways. In one way, when something does not have what another thing is suited by nature to have, even though the first be not suited by nature to have it ; as when a stone is said to be a dead thing because it lacks life, which life some things have by nature. Privation is said in another way when a thing does not have what another of the same genus is by nature suited to have ; as if a mole were said to be blind. In a third way, when a thing does not have what it, itself, is suited by nature to have. And [when used] in this last way privation implies an imperfection.²

For a proper understanding of the above division, a few remarks are in order :

1) The first kind of privation, although it requires a subject, does not indicate any relation between the subject and the privation, other than the mere negation. Consequently, it will be identical with the absolute negation when the latter is said of some real subject. Thus, when I say of a spiritual substance that it is non-white, I am indicating the absence of a form which the subject is not suited to have (and hence, a privation in the first sense), and, at the same time, I am making use of non-white as an infinite name. These parts of the division of negation are not, then, mutually exclusive.

2) The second type of privation is said of those things that are in a genus in which are found some beings apt to have the form or perfection denied, "as blind is not said simply of that which does not have sight, but within the genus of animal, which is suited to have sight."³ This indicates a certain relation, other than the mere negation, between the subject of the privation and the form of which the privation is the negation. It is called, therefore, a "negation within a genus."⁴ But we must be careful to notice that the expression, *negatio in genere*, is sometimes restricted to mean a negation in a subject which is not only in the same genus as those things that are suited to possess the form negated, but is, itself, apt to possess this form ; "for not every non-seeing thing can be called blind, but only that which is suited to have sight."⁵ So, "blind" as said of the

1. *In I Sent.*, d.28, q.1, a.1, ad 2 : "Every negation which is in some determined subject can be called a privation."

2. *Ia*, q.33, a.4, ad 2. The same division is found in *In I Sent.*, d.28, q.1, a.1, ad 2.

3. *In IV Metaph.*, lect.3, n.565.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

mole, for example, may be said to be a *negatio in genere*, insofar as the mole is of the genus "animal;" but in a stricter sense it is not a *negatio in genere* in this case, because the mole is not suited by nature to have sight.¹

The third, and in this division, the strictest sense of privation, "when a thing does not have what it is suited by nature to have," is said to imply an imperfection. Privation is indeed used in this sense by St. Thomas. Certain expressions are said to imply an imperfection if taken in a privative sense, but not if taken negatively. Such are, for example, the expressions, *infinitum*,² *remotio boni*,³ *defectus*.⁴ In such cases privation seems to imply the lack of a form that a being is not only able to possess, but one that it *ought* to possess. If we take the last example given, that of *defectus*, we see this further condition explicitly mentioned:

... the intellect of the angel does not have a defect if defect is taken privatively, namely, [to mean] that it would lack what it ought to have. But if it is taken negatively, every creature is thus deficient in comparison with God...⁵

If we take the third sense of privation to include the notion of imperfection, then we must admit another sense, in which a being lacks a form that it could possess, abstracting from the perfection or imperfection implied by this form relative to this being. Even though the very word, "privation," brings to mind a certain deficiency, still, it would be very difficult to say, in every case, whether a privation or the opposed habitus represents a greater perfection for the subject (it being understood that privation is not taken in its purely negative character, for opposed to a negation any form is a perfection).

This is made clear in the *Metaphysics*,⁶ where the opposition of privation and habitus is said to be "the first contrariety, because the opposition of privation and habitus is included in every contrariety." Strictly speaking, contrary opposition is had only when the privation is perfect, that is, only when there is a question of extremes in the same genus. Thus "black" is the perfect privation of "white," but "grey" would be a privation of "white" without being a perfect privation.

St. Thomas, in enumerating the species of motion, finds the conditions required for contrariety in the three categories of quality,

1. Cf. p.90, note 1. Regardless of the ability of the mole to see, this is obviously the basis of the distinction between the second and third types of privation as given on p.95.

2. *In I Sent.*, d.3, q.1, ad 4; *IIIa*, q.10, a.3, ad 1.

3. *Ia*, q.48, a.3.

4. *Ia*, q.12, a.4, ad 2.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *In X Metaph.*, lect.6, n.2036.

quantity and place, because he finds in these categories the possibility of a "greatest distance" between two extremes :

In qualities . . . contrariety appears because . . . there is found in one genus the greatest distance between two determined extremes, as in colors between white and black, and in tastes between sweet and bitter.

. . . But in quantity and place the greatest distance between determined extremes is not found, if these categories are taken according to the common notions of quantity and place ; but only if they are understood as being in some determined thing ; as in any particular species of animal or plant there is a minimum quantity from which the movement of growth begins, and a maximum quantity in which it terminates. Likewise, in the case of place, two terms at the greatest distance can be found in an particular motion . . .¹

The expression, "perfect privation," is used then, at least in some instances, to indicate a contrary which is at the "greatest distance" from its opposite.

Now, although "one contrary is always as something imperfect and as a privation in regard to the other,"² we should be hard put to decide which opposite represents the most perfect state for a particular subject. Taken in the abstract, one of any pair of contraries will be such as to be aptly designated a privation, and its opposite a habitus ; and thus, we would call "black" a privation and "white" a habitus. Taken thus they appear related as imperfect to perfect. Nevertheless, we must still admit that, in the first place, a subject which is in possession of the habitus is, at the same time, in privation as regards the opposite ; what is white is in privation as regards black. And secondly, for a particular subject the quality that is designated by the privation (in the case where the privation is perfect it designates some determined nature of the same genus) may represent a greater perfection than the quality designated by the habitus.

There seems to be a justification, then, for introducing the notion of a privation which would indicate the absence of a form in an apt subject while abstracting from the perfection or imperfection involved in the absence or presence of this form in a particular subject. Our division of privation can be expanded, in the light of these considerations, to include privation in an apt subject without implying imperfection, and also what we have called perfect privation. As developed up to this point, the division of negation can be presented summarily as follows :

Negation *prout se habet in re* :

1. Negation which does not determine a subject :

a) The absence of a particular form ; v.g., non-man. This is the infinite name, which can be said of being and non-being alike.

1. *In V Phys.*, lect.3, nn.5-6.

2. *In III de Anima*, lect.11, n.759.

b) "Pure *non-ens*."

2. Negation in a determined subject (privation) :

a) When a thing does not have what any other is suited to have ; v.g., non-seeing as said of a stone.

b) When a thing does not have what another of the same genus is suited to have ; v.g., non-seeing as said of an animal which does not have the power of sight.

c) When a thing does not have what it is suited to have,

i) lacking it to any degree ; v.g., non-white as said of what is grey ;

ii) being in a state of perfect privation ; v.g., non-white as said of what is black.

d) When a thing does not have what it is suited to have and ought to have ; v.g., non-seeing as said of man.

It is true that we could enumerate more meanings of privation than those given here, but by and large all other meanings are reducible to the above. In Book V of the *Metaphysics*, where the various meanings of terms are given, we find a total of nine ways of understanding privation,¹ although not all are mutually exclusive. Privation is there said to require two conditions, a negation, and an aptitude in a subject. There follow four modes of privation from the viewpoint of the aptitude in the subject, and five from the viewpoint of the negation. But all of these meanings can be seen to fall under one or the other of the divisions of privation we have enumerated. It may, however, be worth noting a certain restricted sense of privation which does not easily fit into our division, and which is quite important, particularly in the Philosophy of Nature.

This type of privation is that defined by Aristotle in the *Praedicamenta*² and explained later in more detail in the *Metaphysics*.³ The following text from the *Commentary of Cajetan on the Praedicamenta*⁴ explains this new meaning :

... in common usage privation is taken in two ways, in one way meaning the negation of some form in a subject apt to have it, and in this way darkness is said to be the privation of light, and ignorance the privation of knowledge ; it is thus that privation is given as one principle of natural things in the *First Book of the Physics*. In another way, and more strictly, privation means the negation of a form in a subject suited to have both (form and privation) in an irreversible order, and in this way blindness is said to be the privation of sight, and death the privation of life . . .

1. Lect.20, n.1070 sqq.

2. C.10, 12 a 29.

3. Cf. *In VIII Metaph.*, lect.4, n.1752 sqq. ; also, *In X Metaph.*, lect. 6, nn.2052-2053.

4. CAJETAN, *In Praedicamenta Aristotelis*, edit. Laurent, p.205.

There are some privations that have an immediate relation to the subject of the form, and "between such a privation and the opposed form there is a mutual transformation."¹ In other words, the subject can receive the form after the privation, or the privation after the form, indifferently. "But there is another privation which is not related to the subject of the form except by means of the form, since it (the privation) is a kind of destruction [of the form]; as blindness is the corruption of sight, and death the destruction of life. And in the case of such [privations and forms] there is no mutual convertibility."² In these latter cases of privation the movement is only in one direction, from the form to the privation, for the subject can receive the privation only after having had the form, and it is not, therefore, indifferently related to both form and privation. The change in the opposite direction (from privation to form) can take place only "through a reduction to prime matter."³

And the reason for this is that whenever matter is related to different things in a certain order, it cannot return from what is posterior to what preceded according to this order. Just as in the generation of an animal the blood comes from food, and from the blood come the seed and the menstrual [fluid] from which the animal is generated. But this order cannot be changed so that blood would come from the seed, or food from the blood, except through a reduction to prime matter; because there is a certain determined manner of generation for each thing . . . It is the same for the dead and the living, and for the blind and the seeing, et cetera; and so, from such privations there is no return to the habitus, except through reduction to prime matter.

But if there be any privation to which matter is immediately ordered, namely, a privation which signifies nothing but the negation of a form in matter, without any order to the form on the part of the privation; from such a privation there can be a return to the form, as from darkness to light.⁴

This type of privation is obviously of great importance in the Philosophy of Nature, for although prime matter, considered in itself, is indifferent in regard to any particular form, still, in the concrete real object, the privations in prime matter, infinite in number, are to be considered in a certain order, for the forms of which matter is deprived will be received only in a certain order. This has important consequences for the study of natural beings, and particularly in relation to the more philosophical study of evolution.⁵

In view of the distinction we have made between the opposition of privation and habitus and that of contrariety, a very particular

1. *In X Metaph.*, lect.6, n.2052.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *In VIII Metaph.*, lect.4, n.1752.

4. *Ibid.*, nn.1753-1754.

5. Cf. L. E. ORIS, *La Doctrine de l'Évolution*, Montréal, Fides, 1950, vol.II, c.3.

problem arises by reason of a passage in the *Metaphysics*. We shall first of all clarify the distinction between these two types of opposition and then present the text so as to prepare the way for the solution of the difficulties that follow from it.

It has already been pointed out that every contrariety implies a privation, but not every privation is contrariety. In the case of a thing which is apt to have a certain form, there is a question of contrariety only when we are dealing with extremes in a particular genus, that is, with a state of perfect privation on the one hand, and the possession of the form on the other. Contrariety implies terms which are at the greatest distance from one another within a certain genus. Thus, "black" and "white" are contraries in the genus of color; but "white" and "non-white" are related as habitus and privation, provided that what is said to be "non-white" is susceptible of color. (If "non-white" be taken as the infinite name, the opposition is rather one of contradiction, for to fall under even the broadest sense of privation some subject is required.)

The opposition of habitus and privation is immediate in a particular apt subject, that is, the subject is not susceptible of any intermediate state between the habitus and the privation. An object susceptible of color must, for example, be either white or non-white. In the case of contrariety, on the other hand, intermediate states are possible between the contrary extremes. For example, between black and white there are any number of intermediate colors, so, an object in the genus of color obviously need not be either black or white. While the privation, therefore, does not determine any nature in the subject (although it presupposes a subject having an aptitude for a form), a contrary requires a determined disposition in the subject, and necessarily signifies some nature (v.g., black as the contrary of white) which is in the same genus as the absent form.

This doctrine on the relation between a simple negation, a privation, and a contrary is put precisely in the following text:

Negation neither posits anything, nor does it determine a subject for itself; and so, it can be said of being as well as of non-being, v.g., "not-seeing" and "not-sitting". Privation, although it does not posit anything, determines a subject for itself, for it is a negation in a subject; "blindness" is said only of what is apt to see. But a contrary both posits something and determines a subject; for "black" is a species of color.¹

With these distinctions clearly in mind we may now proceed to the text which causes the difficulty:

Another diversity of privation is this, that some privations determine subjects for themselves, others do not. For it was previously said that what

1. *Ia*, q.17, a.4, c.

lacks anything, even if it is not suited to have it, is sometimes said to be in privation. But from this diversity of privation it can happen that there be or not be an intermediary in certain contraries ; as if we were to say that since man is said to be good according to political virtues, if the evil which includes the privation of good requires a determined subject, the peasant, who does not participate in civil intercourse, is neither good nor evil from the point of view of civil goodness or malice.¹

This text presents the following difficulties :

1) It is said here that privation sometimes determines a subject and sometimes does not. But in the next to the last text quoted, as well as in numerous others,² privation is said to differ from a simple negation precisely by the fact that it determines a subject.

2) The opposition between good and evil, which is described in many texts³ as an opposition of privation and habitus, is apparently presented here as an opposition of contrariety. This is confirmed by the preceding paragraph in the *Metaphysics*, where good and evil are given explicitly as example of contraries.

Both difficulties have their solution in a consideration of the context. It is a question here of the relation between *moral* good and evil. St. Thomas uses the example of civil goodness and malice. A man who lives outside the framework of society cannot be said to be politically evil merely because he lacks political virtue. Although he is non-virtuous (in this restricted, political sense), he is not for that reason evil (even in this restricted sense). Between the terms "politically good" and "politically evil" there is an intermediate state possible. "The peasant . . . is neither good nor evil from the point of view of civil goodness or malice."

Now, if we consider evil, for the moment, as a privation of good, we see that it is a kind of privation that determines its subject to a much greater extent than is required for the common notion of privation. For the notion of privation is satisfied as long as there is implied some subject in which the negation is found. We could speak of the absence of political virtue in a stone, and because there is a subject it would be a privation, in the broadest sense of the term. The subject remains here relatively indetermined, for a stricter sense of privation would require an apt subject. Thus, the absence of political virtue in a peasant is a privation which requires a more determined subject, or determines its subject to a greater extent, than the first type of privation. But there remains an even greater determination

1. *In X Metaph.*, lect.6, n.2057.

2. Cf. *Ibid.*, n.2054 ; *In I Sent.*, d.28, q.1, a.1, ad 2 ; *In IV Metaph.*, lect.3, n.565 ; *ibid.*, lect.20, n.1070 sqq.

3. Among other texts cf. *Ia*, q.14, a.10 ; *Ia IIae*, q.75, a.1 ; q.85, a.4 ; *De Ver.*, q.2, a.15, c.

possible in the subject relative to privation, and this is involved in the strictest sense of privation, which requires not only a subject, and an apt subject, but a subject which ought to have the form. This last sense requires the most determined subject of all, and so, in relation to it the other senses of privation can be said not to determine their subject. Briefly, then, a privation always requires a subject, but the strictest sense of privation requires the most specific, or determined subject, and so, the other types of privation can be said to leave their subject relatively indetermined. This explains why it can be said that some privations determine their subject and some do not.

With regard to the second difficulty, it must be admitted that St. Thomas speaks universally of evil as a privation of good, and even at times specifically of moral evil in the same terms :

The disorder of sin, and any evil, [is] not a simple negation but the privation of that which a thing is suited to have and ought to have . . . evil, which consists in a certain privation . . .¹

Every sin, by the very fact that it is an evil, consists in a kind of corruption, or privation, of good.²

Evil, insofar as it is evil, is the privation of good.³

But while it is universally true of evil that it is the privation of good, in the case of moral evil there is an additional element, not found in physical evil, which makes the opposition between moral good and moral evil an opposition of contrariety, and not one of mere privation.

Evil is said to be contrary to good in moral things more so than in natural things, because moral things depend on the will.⁴

If good and evil were opposed merely as privation and habitus there could be no intermediate state in an apt subject, and such is actually the case in the things of nature, because "evil in nature follows absolutely on privation,"⁵ so that "good and evil in nature, although not immediate absolutely, are immediate in regard to their proper subject, as privation and habitus."⁶ In the case of natural evil and natural goodness there is an opposition such that if a thing lacks the good which it is *aptum natum habere*, it can, for that very reason be called evil.

1. *Ia IIae*, q.75, a.1, c.

2. *IIa IIae*, q.118, a.5, c.

3. *Cont. Gent.*, III, c.9.

4. *De Malo*, q.1, a.1, ad 4.

5. *Ibid.*, q.2, a.5, ad 3.

6. *Ibid.*

But when it comes to moral evil, we find that there is more involved than a mere privation. In fact, "sin is not a pure privation, but an act deprived of its due end."¹ If sin were a pure privation, then, morally evil acts would be specified by the forms of which they are deprived. Such is not the case, for "sins are specifically distinguished by the objects of the acts, rather than by their opposites."² If evil were merely the absence of good then it could not be the specific difference which constitutes such an evil act or such a vice. As a matter of fact

Good and evil are not constitutive differences except in moral things, which receive their species from the end, the object of the will, on which moral things depend. And because good has the nature of an end, therefore, good and evil are specific differences in moral things — good, *per se*, and evil insofar as it is the removal of the due end. But nevertheless, the removal of the due end does not constitute a species in moral things, except insofar as it is joined to an undue end ; just as in natural things we do not find the privation of a substantial form except joined to another form. Evil, therefore, which is a constitutive difference in moral things, is a *certain good*, joined to the privation of another good ; as the end of the intemperate man is not to lack the good of reason, but what is pleasurable to the senses without the order of reason. So, evil is not a constitutive difference precisely as evil, but by reason of the good adjoined.³

In moral affairs, then, the constitutive difference of an evil act, as opposed to a good act, is not a privation, but something positive. This something positive is the relation of the will to an undue end, to which undue end is joined the privation of the due end.⁴ That is why we find in moral evil not only privation but contrariety, in relation to moral good. This contrary evil, which is based on the positive inclination of the will to an undue end, is even called "a certain good" joined to the privation of another good. It is a good because it is a real order or relation of the will, and it is an evil because it is accompanied by the privation of the order which ought to be present.

When compared with moral good, moral evil is not a mere privation, then, but a contrary disposition ; and since St. Thomas explicitly opposes contrariety to privation in speaking of this opposition, he is obviously referring to proper and positive contrariety. The same meaning of privation, "the lack of a form which a thing ought to possess," can be seen to have a different implication in the natural order and the moral order. In nature the "ought" is based on what is required for the perfection of the objective nature only, so that the

1. *Ia 11ae*, q.72, a.1, ad 2.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ia*, q.48, a.1, ad 2 (author's italics).

4. Cf. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Curs. Theol.*, Vives edit., vol.V, d.9, a.2, n.15 sqq., p.695.

lack of a certain form immediately implies evil, and here the opposition between privation and habitus is immediate. In the moral order the "ought" is based upon a subjectively recognized moral obligation as well as on the nature of the objective act, and so there cannot be a lack of moral goodness sufficient to constitute moral evil without a positive tendency of the will towards an undue end. That is why the text of the *Metaphysics* we are discussing can speak of a privation which admits of an intermediate state between the privation and habitus. For while there is no intermediate state between white and non-white in a subject suited to possess either, there is an intermediate state between white and black. Similarly, although there is no intermediate state between good and evil in natural things, where evil is nothing but the privation of good, there is an intermediate state between moral good and moral evil, because in the latter case we have an opposition of contrariety between positive extremes.

To conclude this study of negation as found in things, one more distinction must be explained. This is the distinction between a real negation and a negation formed by the reason.

There are certain opposites of which each posits some nature, as 'white' and 'black.' And in such opposites the negation of either is a real negation, that is, the negation of some thing . . .

But there are certain opposites of which only one is a certain nature, and the other is but the removal, or negation, of it, as is clear in those things opposed according to affirmation and negation, or according to privation and habitus. In such things, the negation of that opposite which posits some nature is real, because it is the negation of some thing ; but the negation of the other opposite is not real, because it is not of some thing.¹

. . . in multitude there is negation, or real privation, insofar as one thing is not said to be another ; and the negation implied in the notion of unity denies this kind of distinction through negation. Whence, I say that this negation in which the notion of unity is fulfilled is nothing but a negation of the reason only (that is, a negation formed by the reason).²

The nature of this distinction is not difficult to see. It is a question of the character of what is negated and not of the subject of the negation. If what is denied is a real form, the negation is real ; if it is a being of the reason only, then the negation is a non-real negation, or a negation of the reason. A real negation is obviously not a real being, but the absence of something real, that is, the absence of some form which is capable of existing. The negation of white is thus a real negation ; the negation of non-white would be a negation of the reason only.

1. *De Ver.* q.28, a.6, c.

2. *In I Sent.*, d.24, q.1, a.3, ad 1.

This is the meaning of real negation and negation of the reason as made use of by St. Thomas. The term "real negation" is found in an altogether different meaning in John of St. Thomas, according to whom

a real negation, that is, *belonging to a real subject*, can negate something non-real ; as : man is not a chimera, nor is he a being of the reason ; and the negation of these is true ; . . .¹

According to this interpretation, as long as the subject is real the negation is a real negation, regardless of the nature of what is denied of this subject. For St. Thomas, on the other hand, the negation is real provided it is the negation "of some real thing," and the reference is not at all to the subject of which the negation is said. Each interpretation is justified in making use of the term "real," but it is important to see on what this designation falls.

III. HOW NEGATIONS ARE KNOWN

If the proper object of the human intelligence is the subject of such a variety of negations as has been explained in the last chapter, it seems hardly necessary to point out that this intelligence must needs know negation, and know its objects by and through negations to the extent that the negations are found in the object. This necessity might then be immediately explained from the point of view of the object, an object whose negative character would have to be known by *any* intelligence if it is to be known as it is in itself. There would be then no need of assigning such knowledge of negation to the human intelligence in particular ; or we might even say that knowledge by way of negation indicates, in this context, a perfection in the knowing faculty, since adequate knowledge of the object demands it.

In a certain sense such a position is justified and it can be conceded that if the perfection of knowledge consists in knowing a thing as it is in itself, then the knowledge of sensible objects, which are the subject of a multitude of negations, and more especially of privations, would be quite inadequate if it were incapable of grasping these negations. But we are not particularly concerned here with the perfection or imperfection of the intelligence, since we are rather trying to describe the role of negation in human knowledge ; and if knowledge of, or through, negation is not always indicative of imperfection in the knower, this fact is not of special importance. Certainly, if sensible objects are real they must fall under the object of the divine intelligence, and if they are characterised by a lack of reality,

1. *Curs. Theol.*, Desclée edit., vol.II, d.18, a.4, n.21, p.401 (author's italics).

or negation, this also must be known by God. Consequently, there is no question of using physical negation as a starting point for a proof of the imperfection of the human intellect.

However, there will appear an imperfection in the *manner* in which these negations are known by us, and on this it will be worth insisting, for it is a clue to the proper understanding of the exact value to be given to negation as it is found in the order of real beings, as opposed to the value we might be inclined to give it (an inclination to which recent dialectical philosophies have succumbed) if we were unaware of the contribution of our understanding, and of the positive part of reality, to our knowledge of these negations.

It is almost inevitable that the question should arise: "How can we think non-being?" Negations, as such, are obviously not knowable, since it is of their very definition that they posit nothing in reality,¹ but rather remove being, whether completely or to a certain extent. We are thus obliged to explain how negations are knowable, and how we know them. If the answer to these questions introduces another imperfection in our manner of knowing, then we may perhaps clarify our understanding of this imperfection by considering how the same negations are known by a perfect intelligence.²

To begin with, it must first of all be said that there is a certain negation involved in all knowledge, for

whoever does not understand something one understands nothing. But a thing is something one by the fact that it is undivided in itself and distinct from others; whence, whoever knows anything must know its distinction from other things.

But the first notion of distinction is in affirmation and negation; and so, whoever knows an affirmation must also know a negation; and because privation is nothing but a negation having a subject, . . . and a contrary is always a privation, . . . so it is that by the fact that something is known, its privation and contrary are also known.³

This type of negation, serving merely to distinguish one thing from another, is not peculiar to sensible objects, for it is found even in God, in Whom there is distinction from creatures, and distinction of one Person of the Holy Trinity from another. Here is the way John of St. Thomas puts it: "The Father is not the Son nor the Holy Ghost, that is, He is distinct from Them, and this negation is known in relation to Them."⁴ We are not particularly interested in this

1. When it is said of privation that it determines a subject the meaning is not, of course, that privation is responsible for the positing of the subject in reality, but rather that we call a negation a privation when we find it in a subject.

2. Cf. p.83, note 2.

3. *De Ver.*, q.2, a.15.

4. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Curs. Theol.*, Desclée edit., vol.II, d.18, a.4, n.20, p.401.

type of negation at the present time. As the foundation of the unity and distinction in all things it was treated in Chapter I, where it was explained that in the human intellect an imperfection is involved in the manner of knowing this negation, because for us it represents a step in the discursive progression of knowledge. What concerns us here is negation as peculiar to sensible being, since we are dealing with the necessity of knowing negation by reason of the nature of the proper object of the human intellect.

It is clear that negations and privations do not have an absolute entity, and so, they are not, absolutely speaking, knowable in themselves ; but they may be said to have a relative entity,¹ insofar as they are related to some form or being which they negate. This relation is what specifies a negation and distinguishes one negation from another. They are constituted in a particular species, not by the fact that they are negations, but by the fact that they are negations of such and such forms. "A negation, even though it is not properly in a species, is, nevertheless, constituted in a species by reduction to the affirmation which it follows."²

The specification of a negation, then, and the factor which explains its knowability, is the relation it has to the individual, specific, or generic form which it removes. This is sufficient to place the negation in a species, not properly, but reductively.

Some things are specified according to absolute forms, as substances and qualities ; but some are specified by comparison with something outside of them . . .³

Among these latter are negations, which are "reduced to the genus of affirmation, as non-man to the genus of substance and non-white to the genus of quality."⁴

Only those things which are specified by absolute forms are said to be properly in a genus, but

a thing can be in a genus in two ways : in one way, absolutely and properly, like species which are contained under a genus ; in another way, through reduction, like principles and privations ; as the point and unity are reduced to the genus of quantity, being principles, and blindness and every privation are reduced to the genus of their habitus.⁵

So, the relation to the opposed habitus, or form, is of the essential notion of any negation or privation, even though the relation is not a positive, but a negative one, insofar as the negation removes

1. *Ibid.*, n.6.

2. *Ia IIae*, q.72. a.6, ad 3.

3. *Ibid.*, q.35, a.4, c.

4. *Ia*, q.33, a.4, ad 3.

5. *Ia*, q.3, a.5, c.

the form. Thus, *qualis fuerit forma, talis privatio esse debet*,¹ and the subject in which the privation is found has nothing to do with its specification, "because the subject is indifferent to having the form or the privation, . . . and to having this or that privation . . ."² The negation is properly known when it is known in relation to what it negates. I can think of "non-being," therefore, in the sense of "being-as-absent," or of a privation, like "non-white," in the sense of "white as absent from this particular material substance."

The knowledge of any privation or negation, if it is to be proper knowledge, must attain the negation or privation as relative to something positive. This is true for any intelligence, and does not represent an imperfection except insofar as the negation, itself, implies an imperfection in the object known. Even the divine intelligence knows privations in this way.

Since God knows all things according to their proper notions, I say that those things having an absolute notion He knows absolutely; but those whose notion is dependent on, and relative to, another He knows according to the relation to those things on which they depend. Therefore, since the notion of evil is not absolute, but dependent, insofar, namely, as it differs from created good, He knows evil according to its relation to good.³

The knowledge of one thing through another is not indicative, here, of discourse or imperfection :

in those things that have an absolute notion, it is a defect of knowledge to know one through another, but not in those whose notion is relative to another.⁴

This seems to be at variance to what is said of knowledge through contraries in the *De Anima*.⁵ There, after explaining that those things that transcend the world of sense are known only through negation, St. Thomas continues :

And it is the same for other things which are known through their opposites ; as when the intellect knows 'evil' or 'black,' which are related to their opposites as privations. For one contrary is always as something imperfect and as a privation with respect to the other. And he adds as a reply that the intellect knows each of these (evil and black) in some way by its contrary, namely, evil through good, and black through white. But it is necessary that our intellect, which thus knows one contrary through another, be knowing in potency, and that there be in it the species of one opposite through which it knows the other, in such a way that at one time there be in it the species of white, and at another time the

1. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *loc. cit.*, n.9 *bis*.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Quodl.* XI, q.2, a.un., c.

4. *Ibid.*, ad 1.

5. *In III de Anima*, lect.11, nn.758-759.

species of black, so that through one it may know the other. But if there be any intellect in which there is not one contrary for the knowledge of the other, then, such an intellect must know itself primarily, and through itself other things ; and [it must be] completely separated from matter, even according to being, as has been shown of the divine intellect in the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics*.

The knowledge of one contrary through another is explicitly connected here with the potentiality of the human intellect. Such knowledge is described as discursive, so that when one contrary is known the other is still unknown, and the knowledge of the latter is acquired only by means of the first and through time. An imperfection of this kind must be excluded, as it is explicitly here, from the divine intelligence, which is always in act as to its object in its entirety. How is this text to be reconciled with the universal necessity of knowing negations and privations through the form negated? The examples given by Aristotle, and used by St. Thomas serve only to make the problem more acute ; for we have already quoted St. Thomas as saying that evil can only be known through good and here such knowledge is referred to an intellect in potency.

In the *Summa Theologica*,¹ St. Thomas solves this difficulty himself in reply to an objection brought forward against the possibility of the knowledge of evil by God, an objection based on this very text of the *De Anima* of Aristotle. The text seems to imply that an intellect which is not in potency does not know privation. It was thus interpreted by Averroes,² and St. Thomas accepts the possibility of such an interpretation but finds the solution to the difficulty by referring the text to a particular *manner* of knowing privation rather than to the fact of the existence of such knowledge.

The word of the Philosopher is to be understood thus : the intellect which is not in privation does not know privation through a privation existing in itself [i.e., in the knowing intellect]. This agrees with what was said above,³ namely, that the point and every indivisible thing is known through the privation of division. This results from the fact that simple, and indivisible, forms are not actually in our intellect, but only potentially. For if they were actually in our intellect they would not be known through privation. And it is thus that simple things are known by the separated substances. So, God does not know evil through a privation existing in Him, but through the opposed good.

It is not the knowledge of a privation through the opposed habitus that involves the imperfection, but the successive knowledge of one and the other, the intellect knowing the privation from the

1. *Ia*, q.14, a.10, ad 1.

2. Cf. *Cont. Gent.*, I, c.71 ; *De Ver.*, q.2, a.15, ad 3.

3. See Chapter I.

knowledge of its own state of privation in regard to one of the contraries ; that is, it is aware that at one moment it has knowledge of one of the terms and not of the other, and it arrives at a knowledge of the other as a privation of the first, because of its awareness of its own state of privation. This manner of knowing privation through form is imperfect, although the knowledge of privation through form does not, of itself, imply imperfection.

The same doctrine is explained at greater length in the *Contra Gentiles*,¹ where it is said that in regard to the knowledge of evil and privation the human intellect differs from the divine.

For, since our intellect knows things through their particular and diverse proper species, it knows what is in act through the intelligible species by which the intellect is rendered in act. So, it can know potency insofar as it [the intellect] is at one time in potency to such a species. And because potency is of the notion of privation, for privation is negation in a subject in potency, it follows that it belongs to our intellect to have some knowledge of privation from the very fact that the intellect itself is suited to be in potency.

St. Thomas points out as well that, besides this knowledge of potency *through potency*, which knowledge implies imperfection, there is another type of knowledge of potency and privation, which is through the knowledge of act ; and this is the kind of knowledge of privation that has been assigned to the divine intellect.

The divine intellect can have no knowledge which is not through the divine essence, for the contrary would imply a relation of potency to act on the part of the divine intellect and the species through which it would know. It cannot know potency and privation, then, through potency existing in itself, being, as it is, pure act. "So, by understanding Himself (God) knows all other things, . . . not only acts, but potencies and privations."²

The knowledge God has of evil through good is neither discursive (as if He would know the good and then the evil through it), for "evil is known through good as a thing through its definition, not as conclusions through principles ;"³ nor is it indicative of an intrinsic privation, for the knowledge of privation through an intrinsic state of privation is proper to the human intellect.

We may note in passing that we have here a case of a certain discourse on the part of the object being reflected in the human intelligence. The object which is in potency and privation is susceptible of passing to a state of act, or possession. A similar process exists in the intelligence, which is at one time in potency to the intelligible species by which a certain form or act is known, and is, at

1. *Cont. Gent.*, I, c.71.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

the same time, susceptible of passing later to a state of act or possession in regard to this species. This discursive character of the human intellect, while it doubtless is an imperfection relative to intelligence as such, is yet indicative of a certain "sympathy" between the human intellect and its proper object. It can better appreciate the *propria passio* of its proper object because of its own mobility (taking mobility in the broad sense of the ability to pass from potency to act). It is natural that such an intellect should have a way of knowing privation which is not to be found in an intellect which is always in act.

For the knowledge of sensible natures the knowledge of negations is essential, and this can be had either through the knowledge of the form as absent, or, in the case of the human intellect, through the knowledge of a state of privation in the intellect itself. The former is common to both an imperfect and a perfect intelligence; the latter is peculiar to an intellect in potency. But there is still another way of knowing negations, a way that once again involves an imperfection. This way is likewise peculiar to the human intelligence, and consists in the formation, out of negations, of beings of the reason.

We form a being of the reason when "the intellect considers as a being what is, in itself, not a being."¹ What is, in reality, non-being is known *per modum entis*; it is given "objective existence in the reason to which no real existence corresponds."² John of St. Thomas calls them *entia ficta*; "³ *entia*, because known *per modum entis*; *ficta*, because on the side of reality no true existence corresponds to them. In order that the intellect may better handle these non-beings it finds it convenient to pretend that they are beings, and it is thus enabled to form propositions in which such beings of the reason can serve as subject or predicate. The fact that such propositions are actually formed, making use of concepts that do not represent real beings, is taken by St. Thomas to indicate that the intellect has constructed beings of the reason corresponding to these real non-beings.

We say that things have existence in the reason because the reason deals with them as with beings, when it affirms or denies something of them.⁴

The relation to the formation of a proposition even seems to be presented as the very definition of a being of the reason in a text of the *De Ente et Essentia*, where it is said that a being of the reason is "that of which an affirmative proposition can be formed, but [which] posits nothing in reality."⁵

1. *In V Metaph.*, lect.9, n.896.

2. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *Cursus Philosophicus*, Reiser edit., vol.I, 285 b 14.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *In IV Metaph.*, lect.1, n.540.

5. *De Ente et Essentia*, c.1.

However, the use in the formation of a proposition must not be taken as the actual formation of the being of the reason. Such a use supposes that the being of the reason has already been formed, and it is rather a *sign* that an object which does not have *esse a parte rei* is taken by the intellect *ad modum entis*, because the copula "is" is applied to such a being.¹ In fact, the very first operation of the intellect, simple apprehension, can form beings of the reason, because it can apprehend what is not *ad instar ejus quod est*, without affirming and denying.

The human intellect, in trying to apprehend what has no existence in itself and, consequently, no knowability, is not satisfied to apprehend it through the form which it indicates as absent. It tries to make of the non-being itself a sort of form, as happens when we say that "affirmation is opposed to negation, and that blindness is in the eye."² Thus non-being, which is not knowable by itself, is made knowable by the intellect and becomes susceptible of truth and falsity, "insofar as non-being is a certain being of the reason, namely, apprehended by the reason."³

Beings of the reason may be either negations or relations, the negations including privations.⁴ For our purposes we may leave aside those beings of the reason we call relations and consider only negations and the manner in which they are formed into beings of the reason. To clarify what is meant by a negation as a being of the reason, let us consider an objection put by John of St. Thomas to the division of beings of the reason into negations and relations :

It might be objected that privation and negation are not rightly said to be beings of the reason, for even when no intellect is considering privation and negation indicate the lack of a form and designate the subject as lacking, . . . and so, they are not 'feigned' lacks, nor beings of the reason.

The consequent is evident, because a being of the reason depends on knowledge in order to be and in order to confer its formal effect ; therefore, if a negation, before knowledge, gives its designation to things, it is not a being of the reason.⁵

In reply to this he explains that

negation, insofar as it indicates the lack of a form, is given on the side of reality negatively, because that form is not in the thing. However, it is not from this that it is called a being of the reason, but because while in reality it is not a being, but the lack of a form, it is taken by the intellect in the manner of a being ; and thus, before the consideration of the intellect it

1. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *loc. cit.*, 286 a 12, sqq.

2. *De Ente et Essentia*, *loc. cit.*

3. *Ia*, q.16, a.3, ad 2.

4. Cf. *De Ver.*, q.21, a.1.

5. JOHN OF ST. THOMAS, *loc. cit.*, 288 a 40.

designates the subject as lacking. This lack, however, is not a formal effect, nor is the removal of a form itself a form, but it is taken in the manner of a formal effect by the intellect.¹

It is not every negation, then, that is a being of the reason. Negations and privations are really given on the side of reality, and, as such, they are not beings of the reason, nor are they beings in any sense but simply non-beings. But when these negations are taken as if they were forms residing in the thing and positively modifying it, then they are constituted beings of the reason. In other words, there are two ways in which we can conceive a negation. We may consider it absolutely, as it is in itself; and this must be a negative consideration, in which the negation is taken simply in relation to the form negated, as the absence of this form. Such would be the consideration of "non-seeing," for example, if it were taken by us merely as the absence of the ability to see. (We may call this an absolute consideration² in this context, although it is obviously relative to the form negated. The term 'absolute' is here taken to mean a consideration of a negation as a negation, and the only way a negation can be thus considered is in relation to the form of which it indicates the absence.) To consider a negation in this way does not involve the formation of any being of the reason. The negation is not considered *per modum entis*, but precisely as a non-being. Nor does this type of considerations involve any imperfection, for although it considers negation in relation to a form, it does not consider it as if it were itself a form; in other words, it does not consider it as if it were what it is not. It is in this way that God knows negations, as we have already explained. God knows negations through the opposed forms, but not *ad instar formae oppositae*.

The other way of conceiving negation is a positive consideration, by which we conceive the negation as if it were something positive, a form inherent in a subject. When we thus consider a negation *ad instar entis*, we conceive it not absolutely, but relatively and comparatively.³ We conceive it as if it were what it is not. This obviously implies imperfection, and that is why God cannot be said to form such beings of the reason. He knows beings of the reason *ut quae*, insofar as He knows the ones we form, but He could never be said to form those beings of the reason which by their very nature are indicative of the imperfect apprehension of an object.⁴

Charles R. MACDONALD.

1. *Ibid.*, 288 b 23.

2. *Ibid.*, 302 b 38.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 304 a 6, sqq.; cf. also *Curs. Theol.*, Desclée edit., vol. II, d. 18, a. 4, nn. 11-14, pp. 396-399.