

THREE AND A HALF NOTES ON GRAMMAR
IN ST. THOMAS AQUINAS¹

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In the *Prologue* to his *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas proposes to treat his subject matter “in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners.” Unfortunately, these words might prove deceptively encouraging to the uninitiated reader. As is abundantly clear from even the first question, St. Thomas intends his work for beginners *in theology*, not for beginners in logic, natural philosophy, ethics, or metaphysics.² In fact, Thomas insists elsewhere that there is a natural order of learning,³

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¹ This somewhat whimsical title was suggested by the fact that the fourth note, which was something of an afterthought, is only partly about grammar.

² It is not necessary that the student of theology be an *expert* in all of these fields. It is sufficient that he have an educated knowledge of their principles and methods. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1, Chap. 3 (1094b28ff.); cf. *S.T.*, I-II, Q. 171 art. 4, ad 3.

³ *Expositio Super Librum de Causis*, Lect. 1; and *In IV Ethic.* Lect 7, nn. 1209–11; in Maurer, Armand, trans. *The Division and Method of the Sciences (Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate QQ. V and VI)* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963), Appendix III, “The Order of Learning the Sciences”, nn. 1, 2, pp. 90–92. St. Thomas does not explicitly mention grammar in these two texts, but what is said of logic certainly extends to all the other liberal arts. It should be emphasized that where St. Thomas does speak of grammar, he usually means—not grammar in a colloquial sense of the rules of a particular language—

beginning with the liberal arts⁴ of grammar⁵ and logic, which order the student ignores or violates at his peril.

The main purpose of this investigation is to illuminate four passages in the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa* which might prove troublesome for anyone who is not conversant with the liberal art of grammar.⁶



but precisely *speculative* grammar, that universal and systematic discipline whose *genus subjectum* consists in the modes of signifying. See Thomas of Erfurt, *On the Modes of Signifying: A Speculative Grammar*, Charles Glenn Wallis, trans. (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1938), *passim*, and *Grammatica Speculativa of Thomas of Erfurt*, G. F. Bursill-Hall, trans. (London: Longman, 1972), *passim*.

⁴ “And therefore whatever are ordained to such works of speculative reason (*opera rationis speculativi*) [e.g. the composition of fitting speech (*constructio orationis congruae*)] are indeed called arts by way of a certain similitude, but [more properly] liberal arts.” *S.T.*, I-II Q. 57, art. 3, ad 3; *S.T.*, I-II Q. 94, art. 1, *corp.*

⁵ According to the *Index Thomisticus*, there are seventeen passages in the *Summa Theologiae* (and 137 in his other theological and philosophical works) in which he refers either to the example of the grammarian or to the liberal art of grammar. Furthermore, there are 18 additional passages in the *Summa* (and 188 in his works generally) in which he invokes the “modes of signifying.” See Busa, Roberto, SI, ed., *Index Thomisticus: Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Operum Omnium Indices et Concordantiae* (Rome: Fromman-Holzboog, 1974) s.v. “grammatica”, “grammatice”, “grammaticus”, “[modus] significandi”.

⁶ For grammar as a liberal art, see Long, Kevin G., *Signs and the Modes of Signifying*: (Senior Thesis, Thomas Aquinas College, 1977) *passim*; and Ashworth, E. J., *The Tradition of Medieval Logic and Speculative Grammar: A Bibliography* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978) *passim*.

The First Note on Grammar:

THE MIDDLE VOICE

In the first of his *quinque viae* in the *Prima Pars*, Question 2, Article 3, St. Thomas lays down the key premise for his “argument from motion” that God exists:

Omne quod movetur ab alio movetur.

The most obvious translation of this statement would be:

Everything that is moved is moved by something other.⁷

The immediate difficulty is that the statement appears to be merely redundant or tautological and no more informative than “A is A”, as if to say:

Everything that is moved by something other is moved by something other.

The solution to the problem lies in the observation that the two “*movetur*” in the statement have the same lexical meaning, but are grammatically distinct.

The Three Voices

In grammatically inflected languages,⁸ every *transitive* verb has at least two “voices”: active and passive. These grammatical forms are rooted in—but not identical to—the logical categories of action and passion.⁹ In other words, active voice

⁷ I.e., other than itself. In a parallel text in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas is careful to exclude the possibility that anything “moves itself” in the strict sense. See SCG, Bk. I, Chap. 13, nn. 4–8; cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, Bk. V, Chap. 4 (234b10ff.) Bk. VII, Chap. 1 (241b24ff.); and Bk. VIII, Chap. 4 (254b8ff.). See also *In IV Phys.*, Lect. 1, nn. 638–48; *In V Phys.* Lect. 5, nn. 684–94 and *In VIII Phys.* Lect. 6, n. 521ff.

⁸ See *S.T.*, II-II, Q. 1, art. 6, *corp.*: “In the Greek grammar . . . parts of speech [word endings] are affixed to words to show their number, gender or case.”

⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, Chap. 9 (11b32–8).

verbs signify *according to the mode* of action and passive voice verbs signify *according to the mode* of passion.¹⁰ It is important to note, however, that there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between reality (the mode of being) or logic (the mode of understanding) on the one hand, and grammar (the mode of signifying) on the other. Something which is by its nature active may be signified grammatically by the passive voice and vice-versa. One obvious example is sensation (seeing, hearing, etc.).

We say that we “see” (active voice) various colors and that these colors “are seen” (passive voice) by our senses. Yet the reality is that the colors are active principles (agents) which are imposing their sensible forms on our sense of sight.¹¹ In other words, our senses are essentially passive and do not act at all upon the external colors.

In some languages, transitive verbs have a third voice in addition to active and passive, namely the *middle* voice. This is most notably the case in classical and biblical Greek.¹² The middle voice can signify a condition of activity without necessarily referring to a prior or outside agent. For example:

¹⁰ In the sense of “undergoing” or “being acted upon”.

¹¹ Aristotle, *De Anima*, Bk. II, Chap. 5 (416b32–417a8ff.). Cf. *Aristotelis Librum de Anima: Commentarium* (Turin: Marietti, 1959) Bk. I, Chap. 5, Lect. 10, n. 350ff.

¹² See, for example, Jay, Eric, *New Testament Greek: An Introductory Grammar* (London: SPCK, 1958), pp. 14, 84, 173f. The middle voice often takes the same form as the passive voice, but it does have a separate form in the future and aorist. See also: Hansen, Hardy and Quinn, Gerald, *Greek: An Intensive Course* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) p. 163: “A verb in the middle voice shows that the subject of the verb does the action, but that the action somehow returns to the subject, [and] that the subject has a special interest in the action of the verb. Verbs in the middle voice can be transitive and thus take direct objects; they can also be intransitive. . . . The force of the middle voice varies from verb to verb. The most common meaning the middle voice gives to a verb is ‘to do something for oneself.’”

- Active: ὁ σιδηρεὺς θερμαίνει τὸν σίδηρον
Ho sidēreus thermainei ton sideron
The blacksmith heats the iron.
- Passive: ὁ σίδηρος θερμαίνεται ὑπὸ τοῦ σιδηρέως
Ho sidēros thermainetai hypo tou sidereos
The iron is heated by the blacksmith.
- Middle: ὁ σίδηρος θερμαίνεται ταχέως
Ho sidēros thermainetai tacheōs
The iron heats quickly.¹³

In the latter case, it is not clear whether another prior or external agent is heating the iron or whether the iron is supposedly heating itself. All that is established is that the iron is in some kind of state or condition of progressive and continuous degrees of hotness, independent of any reference to a prior or external agent.

It is less widely recognized that Latin also possesses a middle voice, although it appears to be seldom used.¹⁴ The same examples may be cited:

- Active: *Faber calefacet ferrum.*
The blacksmith heats the iron.
- Passive: *Ferrum calefacetur a fabre.*
The iron is heated by the blacksmith.
- Middle: *Ferrum calefacetur celeriter.*
The iron heats quickly.

¹³ In Greek, the middle voice is sometimes used with a direct or an indirect object. An adverb is used here to simplify and illustrate the grammatical comparison. It is noteworthy that—in Greek, as in Latin—the middle voice often takes the same form as the passive voice.

¹⁴ Most Latin grammars consulted do not even acknowledge that the middle voice exists; e.g. Wheelock, Frederic, *Latin: An Introductory Course* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1956) p. 85. Two exceptions are Allen, J. H. and Greenough, J. B., *New Latin Grammar* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1888) n. 163, footnotes 2, 3; and Gildersleeve, B. L., *Latin Grammar* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1965) n. 212, p. 150.

Again, the iron is here signified as being in a state or condition of continuously progressive and continuous degrees of hotness, independent of any reference to a prior or external agent or cause.

The existence of the middle voice in English is typically ignored or denied¹⁵ in standard Greek, Latin and English grammar books, presumably on the grounds that it has no special form to distinguish it grammatically (i.e. by inflection) from the active voice.¹⁶

“*Everything That Moves . . .*”

It is now possible to revisit the proposition from St. Thomas’ *prima via* or “first way”:

Omne quod movetur ab alio movetur.

At first glance, this proposition appears to contain two verbs in the passive voice, or rather, two instances of the same passive-voice verb. In other words, it appears to mean:

Everything that is moved [passive voice] is moved [passive voice] by another.

¹⁵ E.g. Jay, p. 84; Shertzer, Margaret, *Elements of Grammar* (New York: Collier Books, 1986), p. 26; Nesfield, J. C. *Aids to the Study and Composition of English* (New York: Macmillan, 1997); Chap. 4, Section 5, n. 104, p. 46; Warriner, John E., *Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition: Second Course* (Chicago: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1986) pp. 59–66.

¹⁶ Unlike in Greek and Latin, the form of the middle voice in English typically follows that of the active rather than the passive voice. The failure to recognize the English middle voice is otherwise inexplicable since it is quite common even in everyday parlance: e.g. “The clock *reads* noon” (the clock does not actually “read” at all, but “is read”). “This biography *reads* (is read) like a detective novel.” “The Latin word ‘*amare*’ translates (is translated) into ‘to love.’”, “My horse *spooks* (is spooked) easily”. Other examples can easily be found in advertising: “This car *drives* (is driven) like a dream.” “This pizza *cooks* (is cooked) in your microwave.” “This sparkling water *drinks* (is drunk) like champagne.”

The passive voice, which signifies according to the mode of “passion” (i.e. “undergoing”) already implies something—stated or unstated—which is signified according to the mode of action or agent. Therefore, grammatically, the proposition would be redundant and uninformative (if not meaningless). However, if the first verb is interpreted as being in the middle voice, the proposition must be read differently:

Everything that is moved [middle voice] is moved [passive voice] by another.

Or, more expansively:

For everything which is in the condition of continuously progressive transmutation toward act,¹⁷ there must be some prior or external agent which causes it to be in that condition.

This proposition may be taken as (a) self-evident (b) established dialectally (c) empirically verifiable (d) inherently dubious or (e) manifestly untrue. However, it has not been the intention of this investigation either to defend the truth or expose the falsity of St. Thomas’ assertion in the “first way”. It has only been to explain that the grammar of the proposition, correctly understood, does not necessarily involve tautology or redundancy.



¹⁷ I.e., accidental change in quality or quantity or place; cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, Chap. 14 (15a13–15b16).

The Second Note on Grammar:
IN RECTO AND IN OBLIQUO

In Question 29 of his *Treatise on the Trinity*¹⁸ in the *Prima Pars*, St. Thomas addresses the topic of the Divine Persons. In the first article, he adopts Boethius' definition of "person" as "an individual substance of a rational nature." In the fourth article, he takes up the question "Whether this name 'person' signifies relation", that is, whether it signifies relationship or substance in God. The title alone should be a major clue that the issue in this article ultimately involves grammar and the modes of signifying.

In the four objections, it is argued that "person" signifies substance or essence rather than relation. In his response, St. Thomas begins by citing previous opinions that correctly conclude that "person" signifies both substance or essence *and* relation, but which fail to make the proper distinctions and therefore erroneously invite the implication that there are three divine substances or essences in the Trinity.¹⁹ Then he offers his own solution:

Therefore [each] divine person signifies a relation as subsisting [*relatio ut subsistens*] . . . This name "person" signifies relation *in recto* and essence *in obliquo*.²⁰

Both the English Dominican translation²¹ and the Blackfriars translation²² render the last proposition as:

¹⁸ I.e., *S.T.*, I. QQ. 27-49.

¹⁹ It is beyond the scope of this investigation to discuss the details of St. Thomas' complicated explication. It will suffice to point out the grammatical aspects involved.

²⁰ Cf. *Summa Theologiae Sancti Thomae Aquinatis*, Petri Caramello, ed. (Turin: Marietti, 1952) I, Q. 29, art. 4.

²¹ *Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, (English Dominicans, trans.) (New York: Benziger Bros., [1912]).

²² Gilby, Thomas, O.P., ed. (Blackfriars) *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica* (New York: McGraw/Hill, 1964).

The name "person" signifies relation *directly* and the essence *indirectly*.

Unfortunately, the terms *directly* and *indirectly* do not convey the essentially grammatical meaning of St. Thomas' terms *in recto* and *in obliquo*.²³

From Geometry to Grammar

These two terms are ultimately derived from geometry in which *in recto* refers to a line at a vertical right angle and *in obliquo* refers to a line inclined toward the horizontal²⁴ (see Figure 1).

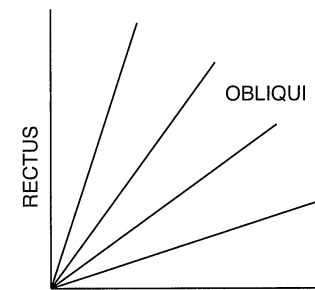


Figure 1

These two terms were later borrowed from geometry by grammarians to distinguish the various cases of the noun, pronoun, adjective, etc. "*In recto*" refers to the nominative case and "*in obliquo*" to the declined cases: genitive, dative,

²³ This is not an isolated instance. St. Thomas uses one or the other of these terms eleven times in this article alone. They are consistently mistranslated.

²⁴ St. Thomas invokes this geometrical meaning in distinguishing the three types of motion. *S.T.*, II-II, Q. 180, art. 6.

accusative and ablative.²⁵ St. Thomas elsewhere explains the basis for this derivation:

The nominative is the one that is said to be a name principally, for the imposition of the name to signify something was made through it. Oblique expressions [*obliqui*] of the kind cited are called *cases* of the name because they *fall away* [*cadunt*²⁶] from the nominative as a kind of source of their declension. On the other hand, the nominative, because it does not *fall away* [*cadit*], is said to be erect [*rectus*].²⁷

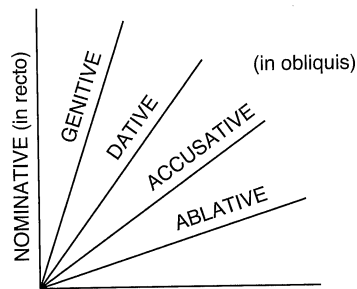


Figure 2

²⁵ Deferrari, Roy, *Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Boston: St. Paul editions, 1960), s.v. “*rectus*” and “*obliquus*”. According to the *Index Thomisticus*, St. Thomas invokes this distinction at least twenty times in the *Summa Theologiae* and almost one hundred times throughout in his other works. References to the “modes of signifying” frequently appear as well.

²⁶ The fourth principal part of *cadere* is *casum*, from which the term “case” is derived.

²⁷ Osterle, Jean, trans. *On Interpretation: Commentary by St. Thomas and Cajetan* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1962), Lect. IV, n. 14, p. 42 (emphasis added); cf. *In Aristotelis Libros Peri Hermeneias et Posteriorum Analyticorum Expositio* (Turin: Marietti, 1955) Lect. IV, n. 49 [14], p. 22.

The crux of St. Thomas’ argument appears to be twofold. First, that the definition of “person” consists of two grammatically distinct parts: (a) the part that signifies *in recto* (by means of the nominative case, i.e. “individual substance”) and (b) the part that signifies *in obliquo* (by means of the genitive case, i.e. “of a rational nature”). Second, that, at least as predicated of God, this is purely a grammatical distinction since “what subsists in the divine nature is nothing other than the divine nature.”²⁸

Both the English Dominican and the Blackfriars translations consistently fail to recognize the grammatical character of St. Thomas’ response to the central issue of this article.



²⁸ *Subsistens in natura divina non sit alius quam natura divina. Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 29, art. 4, corp. St. Thomas pursues this line of reasoning further in *S.T.*, I, Q. 30 and Q. 39, esp. art 3.

The Third Note on Grammar
THE AMBIGUOUS GERUND

In Question 41, article 6 of the *Prima Pars*, St. Thomas takes up a difficulty regarding the persons of the Trinity which defies translation into English. He asks whether or not the Second Person can be said to have the “*potentia generandi*.” The temptation is to render this phrase as “the power of generating”. The question, on this interpretation, is whether or not God the Son has the capacity to generate another Son. The answer would obviously be no.

However, the question as posed in Latin is not so obvious. As St. Thomas points out, the term “*generandi*” can be interpreted either as (a) the *gerund of the active verb* or (b) the *gerund of the passive verb*.²⁹ In other words, the phrase “*potentia generandi*” can mean either (a) “the power of generating” or (b) “the power or capacity of being generated”. Thus the Second Person can be said to have the “*potentia generandi*” in the second sense, but not in the first, which can be attributed only to the First Person in His relation as Father.³⁰

A similar difficulty arises within speculative grammar itself

²⁹ St. Thomas refers to it as a “*gerundivus*” which is best translated in this context as “gerund” since in English “gerundive” ordinarily refers to the verbal adjective; On gerunds and gerundives see Allen and Greenough, n. 159, p. 75, nn. 488–510, pp. 309–20: The gerund can be considered a special case of the gerundive. It is used in the oblique cases as a verbal noun and is always active. The gerundive, by contrast, is always passive, and used either as an adjective per se, or as an adjective functioning as a noun. The gerundive has two uses (a) as a participle and (b) as in conjunction with the noun as an equivalent to a gerund. As Allen and Greenough point out, this makes it active when it is translated into English, but in Latin it retains its passive meaning. See also Wheelock, Chap. XXXIX, pp. 187–89, 190; and Nesfield, pp. 13, 61–63, 171, 314, 322, esp. Chap. XXXIII, *passim*.

³⁰ St. Thomas adds that the noun *potentia* signifies *in recto* while the genitive gerund signifies *in obliquo*.

with regard to its own proper object. The phrase “*modus significandi*”—since it includes the gerund—can be interpreted in two ways according to whether the gerund is taken as active or passive.

The late-medieval grammarian Thomas of Erfurt addresses this problem at the beginning of his treatise *Grammatica Speculativa*.³¹ He proposes that the “active mode of signifying” be understood as belonging to “that which signifies” (words and their consignifications) and the “passive mode of signifying” to the real objects which are signified by those words.³²



³¹ Bursill-Hall, pp. 134–35, p. 330, s.v. “*modus significandi activus*” and “*modus significandi passivus*”; cf. Wallis, n. 3, p. 1.

³² It is important to note that Erfurt is not suggesting that the *modus* itself is “active” or “passive” but that the gerund “*significandi*” has an active or passive sense.

The Fourth Note on Grammar:
THE MISBEGOTTEN MALE

In his *Treatise on the Work of the Six Days*,³³ St. Thomas takes up the question of “The Production of the Woman.”³⁴ The first article is “Whether the Woman Should Have Been Made in the First Production of Things.”³⁵ The first objection is based on a text from Aristotle’s *The Generation of Animals*:

τὸ γὰρ θήλυ ὥστερ ἀρρεν ἐστὶ πεπηρωμένον³⁶
to gar thēlu hōsper arren esti pepērōmenon
Femina est mas occasionatus.³⁷

³³ S.T., I, QQ. 65–102.

³⁴ S.T., I, Q. 92, art. 1–4.

³⁵ The argument is similar in S.T., I, Q. 99, art. 2.

³⁶ *Generation of Animals*, Bk. II Chap. 4 (737a27). Peck, A.L., ed., Loeb/Harvard Classics (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1953); The key term used by Aristotle in this text, πεπηρωμενος (*peperomenos*), is the perfect passive participle of the verb περῶω (*perōō*), meaning “to lame, to maim, to mutilate.” cf. *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955 [1889]) s.v. περῶω (*perōō*). The word is translated as “mutilated” in the Oxford edition and as “deformed” in the Loeb/Harvard edition. For Aristotle’s general view of the strengths and weaknesses of the female of the species throughout the animal kingdom, see *History of Animals*, Bk. X, Chap. 1 (608a32–608b17).

³⁷ This is the Latin translation by William of Moerbeke on which St. Thomas may or may not have relied. It is also possible that St. Thomas was relying on a variant translation by Moerbeke who renders this Greek term elsewhere as “*orbata*” (possibly meaning “bereaved”, or “deprived of children”); see *In II De Anima*, Bk. II, Chap. 4, Lect. VII, (415a25). In his commentary on this latter passage, St. Thomas reads “*peperomenos*” (or “*orbata*”) as “*imperfecta sicut pueri non generant*”, i.e. “imperfect as a child who cannot reproduce”, n. 313; *In II De Anima*, Chap. 4, Lect. VII, n. 314 (415a25).

The Blackfriars translation inexplicably renders “*occasionatus*” into the French postpositive “*manqué*” meaning “short of or frustrated in the fulfillment of one’s aspirations or talents.” *Cassell’s French Dictionary* translates “*manqué*” as “missed, lost, spoilt, defective, unsuccessful, abortive, miscarried”; *Cassell’s French Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1962) s.v. “*manqué*”, p. 469.

For the female is, as it were, a mutilated male.³⁸

The objector’s argument is that nothing of this description should have been made in the first production of things, that is, before the Fall. After proposing two further objections, St. Thomas proceeds, as usual, to offer a *sed contra*³⁹ followed by his own *respondeo* and his replies to the three objections.

He begins his reply to the first objection with a widely quoted but almost universally misunderstood and almost invariably mistranslated proposition:

Per respectum ad naturam particularum, femina est aliquid deficiens et occasionatum.

With respect to the nature of particulars, the female is something “deficient” and “occasionated.”⁴⁰

The correct interpretation of this passage depends on (a) understanding the precise meaning of “nature” in this context; (b) understanding the meaning of the technical terms “*deficiens*” and “*occasionatum*”; and (c) discerning whether the connotation of the statement is intended to be affirmative, negative or neutral.

The obstacles to understanding this proposition are not simply grammatical. They are also etymological, informational, and ideological, as will appear below. However, it is difficult to separate the grammatical from the other elements of the problem. It will be necessary to provide some context for St. Thomas’s proposition and the reasoning that justifies it.

³⁸ *The Generation of Animals*, Bk. II, Chap. 4 (737a27); in Barnes, Jonathan, ed. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), Vol. I, p. 1144.

³⁹ It should be noted that St. Thomas’ *sed contra*s do not necessarily reflect his settled opinion. They occasionally represent the extreme and unnuanced opposite of the objections leaving him the opportunity to steer a middle and more nuanced course.

⁴⁰ This nonce word is used until a proper—or at least plausible—translation of *occasionatum* is established.

The One-Seed Theory

In the *corpus* of the article, St. Thomas reveals his opinion about the generation of animals:

Among perfect animals,⁴¹ the active power of generation [in the semen] belongs to the male sex and the passive power [in the menstrual blood] to the female.

In this passage, St. Thomas appears simply to repeat what he has read in the works of the famous Greek physician Hippocrates (fourth century, B.C.).⁴² His conjecture about conception is known among historians of medicine as the “one-seed” theory. It identified, by way of strict analogy, the fertilization of female animals by semen with the fertilization of the seeds of plants in soil. In both cases, the female principle of generation contributes only the passive *matter*,⁴³ not the active *form* of soul.⁴⁴ This Hippocratic thesis was championed in the works of Aristotle. In the second century A.D., the “one-seed” theory was rendered obsolete by the observations and discoveries of Galen. He advanced a more accurate “two seed” theory according to which both the male and female principles played an active and complementary role.⁴⁵

⁴¹ [*A*]nimalibus perfectis. By “perfect animals”, Aristotle and St. Thomas both mean nothing more or less than animals which *by nature* possess all five senses as well as the power of progressive movement. Thus, on this understanding, an old, diseased, and crippled—yet fully sentient—dog would be a “perfect animal”, in a way in which a prize-winning jellyfish would not.

⁴² Or perhaps simply repeats what Aristotle simply repeats from Hippocrates.

⁴³ It is no accident that the Latin words for “matter” (*materia*) and “mother” (*mater*) are so similar.

⁴⁴ Cf. S.T., I-II, Q. 81, art. 1, ad 1: “The power in the semen is not able to cause the rational soul, nevertheless the motion of the semen is a disposition to the transmission of the rational soul: so that the semen by its own power transmits the human nature from [male] parent to child.

⁴⁵ On the discrepancies between Aristotle and Galen, see May, Margaret Tallmadge, *Galen: On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* [*Περὶ*

Unhappily, Galen’s works were “lost”⁴⁶ in the Middle Ages and did not resurface until the fourteenth century.

The issue that arose for St. Thomas was why—at least among higher animals—females were generated at all.

According to Aristotle, all natural and living beings produce their like:

For any living thing that has reached its normal development⁴⁷ and which is unmutated⁴⁸ . . . the most natural

χρείας μορίων] (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), Vol. II, Bk. XIV, n. 301, p. 31, n. 24: “The question of the production of female semen is one on which Aristotle [following Hippocrates] and Galen differed. Aristotle seems not to have known the ovaries in *vivipara* and denies that the female contributes semen at all. According to him, her contribution is the material cause, the *catamenia* or menstrual blood that furnishes the material which contains the parts *in potentia* and from which the fetus is formed by the male semen acting as the efficient cause and contributing the principle of motion. . . .

“Galen, on the other hand, knowing the ovaries, the ‘female testes’ . . . insists that the female does indeed produce semen. . . . The roles played, according to Galen, by the semen of both male and female in the development of a new individual [are reciprocal]. . . . Both semen have in his opinion both the material and efficient causes. . . .”; cf. pp. 631–41. Galen’s theory in turn became obsolete in the nineteenth century with the development of the microscope which revealed the role of the ovum and the *spermatozoon* in conception. Nevertheless his theory remains an improvement on Hippocrates and Aristotle.

⁴⁶ “Lost” to Western Europe at least: Galen’s writings survived in Arabic and were well known throughout the Islamic world; see Galen, Vol. I, p. 5; see also May, *Galen, op. cit.* Vol. I, p. 5; and Tuchman, Barbara, *A Distant Mirror* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978) p. 105.

⁴⁷ I.e., excluding pre-menstrual girls, and by the same logic, post-menstrual women.

⁴⁸ The expression Aristotle uses here is μη πηρωματα (*mē perōmata*), the negative of an abstract noun derived from the adjective form of the same verb πηρόω (*pēroō*). Liddell and Scott give the basic meaning as “‘maimed [in limb]’, ‘mutilated’, ‘imperfect’, or ‘incapacitated’”. see Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968 [1889]) s.v. πηρός (*peros*). However, in the present context, it is most likely that Aristotle means something like: “a defect, privation or

act is the production of another like itself,⁴⁹ an animal producing an animal, a plant, a plant in order that, as far as its nature allows it to partake in the eternal and divine.⁵⁰

If all natural things thus produce their like, why would unquestionably and incontrovertibly *male* semen not always produce *male* animals?⁵¹

St. Thomas begins his response to this conundrum in the only intelligent way possible given his Hippocratic and Aristotelian assumptions. He appears to concede the objector's premise:

*Femina est aliquid*⁵² *deficiens et occasionatum*⁵³

However this concession is couched in a crucial distinction. Consider the opening words:

disability in the organ of generation." It is not clear whether St. Thomas, in his *Commentary on De Anima*, used the Greek text or relied on the Latin translation of William of Moerbeke. The latter rendered this word as "*orbata*", meaning "deficient, wanting, defective, "incapable". See Deferrari, s.v. "*orbatus*." In any case, St. Thomas reads "*peperomenos*" or "*orbata*" as "*imperfecta sicut pueri non generant*", i.e. "imperfect as a child who cannot reproduce"; see *In II de Anima*, Bk. II, Chap. 4, Lect. VII (415a25). He recognizes, in other words, that the lack of something, in this case the power to reproduce during childhood, is sometimes in accordance with nature—and therefore not necessarily a "defect".

⁴⁹ Of the same *infima species*.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *De Anima*, Bk. II, Chap. 4 (415a27-415b2).

⁵¹ This remains a conundrum whether or not one assumes a Fall.

⁵² St. Thomas here provides ammunition for his opponents which none of them seem to notice. He uses the neuter "*aliquid*" (something) implying that a female is a "thing" rather than a person. However, in his defense, it must be noted that using "*aliquis*" (someone) would falsely restrict the proposition to human beings in a discussion extending to all living things.

⁵³ There is no compelling reason to think that St. Thomas regarded "*occasionatum*" as a synonym for—or even a close paraphrase of—the Greek "*peperomenos*".

Per respectum ad naturam particularum. . . .

With respect to the nature of the parts. . . .

This is to be contrasted with a later phrase:

Sed per comparationem ad naturam universalem. . . .

But by comparison with the universal nature. . . .

The Four Levels of Nature

St. Thomas here invokes a deceptively familiar distinction between whole and part. At the first level, it is the distinction between substances and their parts. To begin with, only substances have natures in the proper sense. Strictly speaking, therefore, neither plant seeds nor animal semen are substances,⁵⁴ any more than an apple or acorn is a substance.⁵⁵ They are *parts* of a substance: the animal, the apple tree, the oak. They differ from other parts in that: (a) they are naturally separable⁵⁶ and (b) they are the means by which the animal and the tree produce another like itself in species. Since a part of a substance does not have a nature *in the strict sense*,⁵⁷ it certainly does not have a *nature* independent of the substance. Therefore, the generative "parts" of substances should not be expected to reproduce a simulacrum of *themselves*, but rather a

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Categories*, Chap. 5, (2b15): "primary substances are most properly called substance in virtue of the fact that they are the entities which underlie everything else."

⁵⁵ Parts belong in the category of substance by reduction. Similarly, the point does not belong to the category of quantity, but is reduced to it as a "principle", see *S.T.*, I, Q. art 5, *corp*.

⁵⁶ The limbs of an animal or tree are separable by violence, but not by nature; e.g. it is not within the natural inclination of the man or the oak that it lose a limb.

⁵⁷ St. Thomas is speaking loosely when he refers to the "nature of the particulars". It is the "first level of nature" only in an extended sense. On this reckoning, the substances themselves constitute the "second level" of nature.

simulacrum of the substances to which they belong. (An apple does not produce another apple but rather an apple tree.)

At the third level, St. Thomas' distinction applies to the difference between individual natural substances and the totality of the natural order⁵⁸ of which they form a part. Each substance has an individual nature by which it is destined to a certain kind of activity. From this perspective alone, there seem to be contradictions. It is in the nature of the lion to eat zebras, but it is, at the same time, in the nature of the zebra to live a long and healthy life.⁵⁹ It is only from the perspective of the natural order as a whole that one can judge the situation of each species and resolve the contradiction in favor of one species over another. (Despite the individual aspiration of zebras, the general intention of *nature as a whole* appears to be that some of them be eaten by lions).⁶⁰

At the fourth level, St. Thomas recognizes that the natural order itself is a part of the providential order of God who is the Author of Nature.⁶¹ This suggests that even things which appear to us by chance—and some really are by chance—are nevertheless fully intentional on the part of God.⁶² As St. Thomas concludes, God fully intended the woman to be produced in the first order of things. According to St. Thomas' line of reasoning, this was neither accidental, unintended nor a monstrous fluke of nature.

⁵⁸ The third level of "nature" in this analysis.

⁵⁹ The "ecosystem" as it is presently called.

⁶⁰ The zebra's stripes act as natural camouflage in order to *prevent* it from being eaten.

⁶¹ The fourth level of "nature" in the broad sense.

⁶² Klapisch-Zuber, Christiane, ed., *A History of Women in the West, Vol. II: Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 57: "St. Thomas believed that semen was subject to the influence of the stars, through which God worked his will in the world." What St. Thomas believed about the stars is irrelevant. The point is that God directly intends the production of woman precisely as *woman* not as something monstrous, misconceived or misbegotten.

The Feminist Prism

It is now possible to return to the beginning of St. Thomas' reply to the first objection:

Per respectum ad naturam particularum, femina est aliquid⁶³ deficiens et occasionatum.

Whether out of general unfamiliarity with St. Thomas or out of insistence on reading him through the prism of their own ideology, some feminist authors have perceived in this passage something sinister, misogynistic and antagonistic toward women.

Simone de Beauvoir observes in the *Introduction* to her influential book, *Le Deuxième Sexe*:

St. Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an 'imperfect man', 'an incidental' being.⁶⁴

Elsewhere in the same work she writes:

All the Fathers of the Church proclaimed [women's] abjectly evil nature. St. Thomas was true to the tradition when he declared that woman is only an "occasional" and *incomplete being*, a kind of *imperfect man*.⁶⁵

⁶³ St. Thomas here provides ammunition for his opponents which none of them seem to notice. He uses the neuter "*aliquid*" (something) implying that a female is a "thing" rather than a person. However, in his defense, it must be noted that using "*aliquis*" (someone) would falsely restrict the proposition to human beings in a discussion extending to all higher animals.

⁶⁴ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex*, H. M. Parshley, trans. (New York: Bantam Books, 1952 [1949]) p. xvi.

⁶⁵ De Beauvoir, op. cit., Chap. VII, p. 90. Even if St. Thomas, or anyone else, believed that women were "less perfect" than men, it hardly follows that they would be "abjectly evil".

One author who is deeply indebted to Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Daly, explains in her book *The Church and the Second Sex*:⁶⁶

The Aristotelian idea of fixed 'natures', as well as its view of woman having only a minor role in procreation, that of merely supplying the matter whereas the male supplied the form, was taken over by St. Thomas Aquinas. . . . Thus, following Aristotle, Aquinas held that the female is *defective* as regards her individual nature.⁶⁷ He wrote that she is, in fact, a *misbegotten male*, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex. Her existence is due to some *defect in the active force*. . .⁶⁸

According to Barbara McDowell, editor of *The Woman's Almanac*:

St. Thomas Aquinas . . . said that woman is '*defective*' and *accidental* . . . a *male gone awry*.⁶⁹

Elizabeth Gould Davis writes in *The First Sex*:⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Daly, Mary, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1968] 1985) pp. 11, 16, 17f., 47, 53, 56f., 114, 177, 220.

⁶⁷ Daly et al. insist on reading *natura particularum* as referring to the nature of the individual female rather than to the "nature" of the individual seed.

⁶⁸ Daly, op. cit. pp. 62, 91. Daly envisions herself as having "broken free from the stranglehold of patriarchal religion, with its deadly symbols, its ill logic, its gynocidal [sic] laws and other poisonous paraphernalia. . . . Patriarchy is itself the prevailing religion of the entire planet, and its essential message is necrophilia." Daly, op. cit., p. xii.

⁶⁹ McDowell, Barbara, ed., *Woman's Almanac* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Assn., 1977) p. 557. This quotation appears as the entry for "A" in a purportedly humorous section entitled "The ABCs of Sexism."

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1971) p. 291 (emphasis added).

The foremost poet of Puritanism, John Milton, echoed thirteenth-century Saint Thomas Aquinas, who had called woman a "monster of nature" in his lines from *Paradise Lost*:

*Ah, why did God,
Creator wise that peopled highest Heaven
With spirits masculine, create at last
This novelty on earth, this fair defect
Of nature, [Woman]?⁷¹*

Susan Groag Bell in *Women: from the Greeks to the French Revolution* explains the passage in the following way:

[According to Aristotle,] "the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort, viz. it lacks the power to concoct semen. . . . Now of course [in conceiving], the female, *qua* female is passive, and the male *qua* male is active. . . ."

The following excerpt is from St. Thomas' *Summa Theologica*. The similarity of his thought to that of Aristotle . . . is noteworthy . . .

*As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten.*⁷²

Although not a feminist *per se*, Vern Bullough brings a quasi-feminist attitude to bear in his book, *The Subordinate Sex*:

⁷¹ Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. 10. Milton continues: "And not fill the world at once with men as angels without feminine, or find some other way to generate mankind?" *loc. cit.*

⁷² Bell, Susan Groag, *Women: From the Greeks to the French Revolution* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1973) p. 121, 122; the passage from Aristotle is in Peck, A. L., trans., *Generation of Animals* (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943) p. 103, 1. The quotation from St. Thomas is not cited but it is identical to the English Dominican translation.

The official [anti-female] attitudes of the church can be found in the great thirteenth-century doctor of the church, St. Thomas Aquinas. . . . Still, he [at least] recognized that women were human and had a right to exist, although he felt a need to justify her existence since, according to Aristotle, woman was only a 'misbegotten male', and 'nothing misbegotten or defective should have been in the first production of things.' Aquinas felt Aristotle was wrong. Woman, he argued, was not misbegotten but included in nature's intentions *in order to continue the works of generation*.⁷³

Even translators presumably favorable to St. Thomas—like the English Dominicans and Father Gilby of the Blackfriars—have interpreted his words in an unfavorable light:

As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten.⁷⁴

⁷³ Bullough, Vern L., *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes toward Women* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973 [emphasis added]). Bullough seems to be aware that St. Thomas "corrected" Aristotle in the sense of making distinctions that the latter does not make. But he fails to recognize that the rest of Q. 92, article 1, from which he quotes a few words, argues that human generation, unlike that of plants and animals, is ordered to more than to the perpetuation of the species. In fact, St. Thomas, following Aristotle, regards generation as a function of the vegetative power. See *In II De Anima* Ch. 4, Lect. VII, n. 213; Rather, he points to a higher kind of activity, namely the "the more noble work of life which is an intellectual pursuit" (*nobilior opus vitae quod est intellegere*) to which both men and woman are ordained (*ordinatur*).

It is worth noting that Bullough's relatively sympathetic treatment of St. Thomas occurs in a chapter entitled "On the Pedestal: The Beginning of the Feminine Mystique."

⁷⁴ The English Dominicans; this translation of the entire Question (S.T. I, Q. 92, art. 1-4) is reprinted without commentary in Agonito, Rosemary, *History of Ideas on Woman: A Sourcebook* (New York: Capricorn Books/G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977) p. 83ff.

Again, it is not clear whether it is the blindness of feminist ideology or the inherent difficulty of reading thirteenth-century works of theology in translation (or both) that has produced this confusion. In any event, an attempt to address these errors is in order.

The Meaning of Deficiens and Occasionatum

The meaning of "deficiens" is not necessarily pejorative, as has already been suggested. A cause cannot produce anything greater than itself. Therefore it must produce something (a) like or equal to itself or (b) something less perfect *according to that nature*. When the male semen does not produce another male, it follows that what it *does* produce is less perfect than itself.⁷⁵ From this narrow but logical perspective, the generation of the female is "defective". Put otherwise, it is the *act of generation*, not the being *which is generated* that is properly called "defective". According to the "two seed" theory, by the same logic, the *generation* of a male offspring by a female would be equally "defective".

The term "*occasionatum*" requires further scrutiny and explanation.⁷⁶ It is used here three times in the same sense.⁷⁷ It is a past passive participle derived immediately from the supine

⁷⁵ At least from the point of view of its own nature.

⁷⁶ There is no entry for this participial form of the verb in *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. P. G. W. Glare, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), *Lewis and Short's Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989 [1879]), *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, D. P. Simpson, ed., (London: Cassell & Co., 1959), De Burgamo, F. Pietri, ed., *Tabula Aurea* (Rome: Editiones Paulinae, no date); Deferrari's *Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas* is the only dictionary consulted that has even a perfunctory entry for "*occasionatus -a -um*" which merely refers back to the verb "*occasio, -are, -avi, -atum*." This verb has the neutral meanings of "to occasion, cause accidentally, induce"; Deferrari, s.v. "*occasionatus*", p. 720.

⁷⁷ This word occurs in only two other places in the *Summa Theologiae*. The first is in a very similar context in I, Q. 99, art. 2. The other is in a very different context in III, Q. 148, art. 3, ad 1: "The deluge and

(*occasum*)⁷⁸ and the derivative verb "*occasionare*"⁷⁹ which are in turn derived from the verb "*occido*" (from *ob* + *cado*). The primary meanings of the latter are: (a) to fall or fall down; and (b) to set (in the sense that the sun, planets and stars "set" when they move below the horizon.) The first meaning can have a positive, negative or neutral sense, depending on the context. If heavy objects fall, they do so for with varying results, some positive, some negative and some neutral. The second astronomical meaning is purely descriptive and has only a neutral connotation.

The principal parts of the root verb are *occido*, *-cīdēre* *-cīdi* *-cāsūm*.⁸⁰ It should be noted that there is no form of the word *occidēre* which signifies or implies "generation" or "begetting."⁸¹ The main words in Latin that do so are *generare*,⁸² *gignāre*, and *procreare* and their presumed negative past participle forms. St. Thomas nowhere uses any of the latter three terms, at least not in reference to the production of the woman.⁸³

The verb *occasionare* means "to occasion or cause accidentally." Since accidents can be affirmative, negative or neutral, it follows that *occasionare* can be likewise positive, negative or neutral.⁸⁴ It likewise follows that, if *occasionatus* (the past passive participle) can bear a positive, or at least a neutral con-

the punishment of the people of Sodom were inflicted for sins *occasioned* (*occasionatum*) by gluttony." In this passage, "the sins of Sodom" obviously has a negative connotation, but the "*occasio*" itself is neutral or only mildly negative; see *Index Thomisticus*, Vol. 15, s.v. "*occasionatus*", "*occasionata*", "*occasionatum*."

⁷⁸ *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "*occasio*", p. 407.

⁷⁹ Deferrari, *Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas*: s.v. *occasionare*, p. 407.

⁸⁰ This should not be confused with the similar verb *occido*, *-cīdēre* *-cīdi* *-cīsūm* (from *ob* + *caedo*) meaning "to strike down".

⁸¹ Or, *a fortiori*—"misgeneration" or "misbegetting".

⁸² For example, the past participle of this verb occurs twice in the Nicene Creed: *unigenitum* ("only-begotten") and *genitum* ("begotten").

⁸³ Nor could they be found in any of the dictionaries consulted.

⁸⁴ *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "*occasio*", p. 407.

notation, it need not be viewed as essentially pejorative and must be interpreted according to the context laid out above.

If it is stipulated that the semen of a male animal (*qua* male) *by its very nature* "intends"⁸⁵ to produce another male and is frustrated by the accidental production of a female, then it follows that the result is a failed or frustrated or "accidental" (*occasionatus*) male. On this assumption, the term *occasionatus* must be interpreted as at least relatively negative.

However, if the order of nature as a whole intends to use a mode of conception which is arguably accidental (at the level of the individual part⁸⁶) for the sake of producing roughly equal numbers of males and females, then what appears to be "accidental" is actually intentional and purposeful from this perspective. In this context, *occasionatum* would certainly have an positive connotation.

Finally, it should be noted that *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*⁸⁷ gives as the first meanings of the noun *occasio*: (1) "convenient or favorable circumstances" and (2) "the appropriate moment"; *Lewis and Short's Latin Dictionary*⁸⁸ includes among the primary meanings: (1) "fit time", (2) "convenient season", (3) "favorable moment"; *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*⁸⁹ gives the primary meaning as "a favorable moment". Likewise, the *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* defines the English cognate "occasion" as "a principal or circumstance that favors or makes opportune the present action of a free cause. It is sometimes referred to as a accidental cause."⁹⁰ These four sources argue strongly in favor of a positive connotation for *occasionatus*.

⁸⁵ I.e., has as its natural end or purpose.

⁸⁶ I.e., the "male" semen.

⁸⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "*occasio*".

⁸⁸ *Lewis and Short's Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "*occasio*".

⁸⁹ *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co. 1959) s.v. "*occasio*".

⁹⁰ *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*. Wuellner, Bernard, S.J., ed. (Milwaukee: Bruce Pub., 1956) s.v. "occasion", p. 84, [emphasis added].

THREE AND A HALF NOTES ON GRAMMAR

From this perspective, the production of the woman can be construed as a kind of “unintended but welcomed event” or even “a felicitous or serendipitous happenstance.”

It should be clear therefore that neither the context nor the grammar of St. Thomas’ statement at the heart of Question 92, art. 4 bears the interpretations advanced by both his feminist critics and his presumably sympathetic allies.⁹¹



From these four notes it can be concluded that the pursuit of St. Thomas’ theology, at least in some instances, presupposes some familiarity with grammar—in particular, the liberal art of speculative grammar.

⁹¹ In the last analysis, there remain a number of points which are still unclear. First, it is not clear what Aristotle meant by “*peperomenos*”. Second, it is not clear whether Moerbeke’s “*occasionatum*” was an adequate translation or paraphrase. Third, it is not clear what St. Thomas understood by “*peperomenos*” or “*occasionatum*” in the objection or what he intended by repeating it in reply. Fourth, it is not clear whether St. Thomas intended this term to have a positive, negative or neutral connotation. The answers suggested here are largely speculative and provisional but will have to suffice for this investigation.