

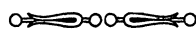
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## Abstraction in St. Thomas

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THE metaphysics of St. Thomas form a closely woven system of ideas. Once the fundamental principles of being are posited, as St. Thomas understands them, the whole concatenation of his theory follows with irresistible cogency. His system is not an aggregation of discrete units of experience assembled to form a verisimilitude; it is a careful deduction from a few irrefragable principles. Controversial ink has flowed in torrents as to whether St. Thomas has balanced the pyramid of his philosophy upon its base or upon its apex; but whatever may be said about the validity of his conclusions, it is at least evident to the impartial observer that his system has the virtue of unity—a unity so close that, if one rejects any integral portion of his whole system, one can hardly retain the fundamental principles on which the system is based.

In no respect is the unity of his system more compelling than in his theory of intellectual cognition. Père Sertillanges, undoubtedly one of the greatest modern interpreters of St. Thomas, goes so far as to say that St. Thomas' *Erkenntnistheorie* is the principle of his metaphysics rather than a consequence.<sup>1</sup> It is certain that St. Thomas' theory of cognition is so closely interlocked with his metaphysics as to be scarcely intelligible without it; and here indeed are the *initia dolorum*.

Interpretations of St. Thomas' theory of cognition tend, if they do not keep cautiously to the middle of the road, to two extremes: one interpretation preserves the shell of St. Thomas' theory without the foundation of his meta-

physics to give it body; the other attempts to out-Angelic the Angelic Doctor himself. The first really does not succeed in uniting the intellect to its object at all; the second is far too successful. If the theory of cognition proposed by St. Thomas is the most effective answer both to idealism and to materialism—and such is by far the prevailing view among modern interpreters—then it is worth while to study it without distortion; and it seems beyond doubt that the first step in finding out what St. Thomas meant is to find out what St. Thomas said. I should apologize for such a banal remark, were it not that so many discussions on what St. Thomas meant have been carried on with a naive indifference to the text.

The key to St. Thomas' theory of cognition is the abstraction of the *species intelligibilis* from the phantasm; but in very truth it seems difficult to find the lock. The first of the two extreme interpretations abandons abstraction without further ado. Abstraction, we are told, is but a metaphor; the intellect as a spiritual faculty can take nothing from a material object. The second extreme embraces abstraction with all its heart, and speaks eloquently of a certain mystic spiritual union of intellect and object. As to the first extreme, it is evident that St. Thomas denies that the intellect takes anything from the entity of the object, and it is also evident that for him abstraction is a very real and a very important process; hence we should, obviously, look for another meaning of the term. The second extreme reads far more into St. Thomas than