

General Analysis of 'Object' in Thomistic Usage*

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'An object' is defined as 'that with which a faculty or habit deals by way of the act(s) proper to that faculty or habit'.¹ Since faculties or habits, via their acts, may relate to an object in different ways, different sorts of objects and different roles of an object need to be discussed.^{2,3}

The terminology used by scholastic philosophers and theologians to classify objects is so confused that hardly any two authors agree in all details of their usage. The main reason for so much confusion is the fact that many authors have overlooked one or both of the following points:

* This text is a free translation of an introductory section of Fr. Zielinski's work, De ultima resolutione actus fidei (Rome: Officium Libri Catholici, 1942), pp. 3-16, with footnotes added by the translator, W. H. Marshner.

¹Notice that 'object' is not quite synonymous with 'thing' (res). An object is something-seen, or something-heard, or something-known, or something-willed, etc., depending on whether the faculty whose act attains the object is vision, hearing, intellect, will, etc. So calling something an "object" connotes a relation to some faculty, whereas calling it a "thing" does not.

²'Faculty' translates Latin 'potentia' in those contexts in which the potentia in question is the intellect, the will, or the sense powers.

³'Habit' translates Latin 'habitus' but not very well. A habitus may be a habit in the ordinary English sense, but it may also be any sort of knack, talent, or facility, whether naturally acquired or supernaturally infused.

-- it is not the case that the object of each and every faculty or habit admits of the same scheme of classification

-- the classification-scheme of an object relative to a habit or faculty does not always coincide with the classification-scheme of an object relative to the act of the same habit or faculty.

A. Classification of an Object Relative to a Cognoscitive

Faculty or Habit

- 1 -

The first classification is into primary object and secondary object, or into formal object and material object.

A primary object can always properly and simply be called a formal object. But a secondary object cannot always simply be called a material object. For a secondary object is one which the faculty or habit really attains in itself; but a simply material object is not attained in itself at all but only accidentally or concomitantly, that is, insofar as it is joined to something else.

The classification of objects into formal and material pertains only to those faculties which are bound up with a bodily organ. For example, in vision the formal object is illuminated color, which is what the eye attains in itself, whereas the material object is the body to which the color is joined and which is not at all attained by the eye directly in itself.⁴ But the clas-

⁴If we ask what is visible, we might answer that a chair is visible, Jones is visible, Mt. Athos is visible, etc. The chair, Jones, and Mt. Athos are material objects of the faculty or power of vision. But if we ask what precisely we see in seeing Jones, the answer will be color. Illuminated color is the formal object of vision, because color is what the act of vision attains in itself. Another way of getting the distinction is to ask, "Why do I have eyes?" To see Jones? Of course not. It is to see the whole class of visible things, and that property by virtue of which anything is a member of that class is color-in-the-light. Still another way to get the distinction is to ask the following two questions. First: what is the visible thing? Answer: it is whatever it is -- a chair, a mountain, a person. Second

sification of objects into primary and secondary belongs only to spiritual faculties. For example, the primary object for the divine intellect and for the divine will is God himself, whereas the secondary objects are creatures; and yet both God and creatures are truly attained in themselves by the divine intellect and will.

Herewith some definitions. 'A primary object' is defined as 'that which is attained by a faculty (or habit) in itself (or per se), first of all, and by reason of its own nature, as that by which the faculty or habit is specified.'

'A secondary object' is defined as 'that which is attained by a faculty (or habit) in itself (or per se) but not first of all and not by reason of its own nature but secondarily and by reason of the primary object, and which is

question: what is the visible thing as visible? Answer: colored. The first question takes the phrase 'visible thing' materialiter, the scholastics used to say, whereas the second question takes the same phrase formaliter. Such usage of the couplet, 'materialiter/formaliter' accounts for the odd terms 'material object'/'formal object.'

Now take the case of hearing. What can I hear (or: what is audible)? Well, I can hear a train, a truck, a radio; but these are not properly speaking even material objects of hearing; they are only causes of the material objects of hearing. On the other hand, I can hear a rumble, a roar, a scream, a symphony. These different sound-wave-packages are material objects of hearing. Now that property by virtue of which any sound-wave-package is a member of the class of audible things (sounds for a human ear) is pitch (within a certain range). Therefore the formal object of hearing is pitch, or pitched timbre, or some such.

It is satisfying to observe that the Thomistic approach to vision, hearing, etc., avoids the opposite extremes of naive realism and phenomenalism. A naive realist ignores or denies the distinction between formal and material object; the phenomenalist turns the distinction into a separation. Suppose I say, "I see Jones." The phenomenalist replies, "No you don't. You see a patch of color. What you see is your sense-datum (in this case, a certain patch of color), and from this you construct or infer something else, which you do not see at all, and which you call Jones." The Thomist replies, "Yes, you do see Jones -- not directly in himself, to be sure, but concomitantly in seeing a patch of color. For the patch of color which you see is Jones-as-visible."

therefore ext^raneous to what properly specifies the faculty (or habit).[^]

Now for some explanations of these definitions.

(1) What is attained by a faculty or habit "in itself or per se" stands in opposition to what is simply a material object, since the latter is not attained in itself or per se but only per accidens.

(2) 'To attain an object "first" rather than "secondarily"' means that the habit or faculty, of its own nature and innate inclination, is carried toward and ordered to such an object, because the faculty or habit is not produced save precisely in order to attain such an object. Hence, 'to attain an object "secondarily" means that the potency or habit, because it is not produced in order to attain precisely such an object, reaches out to it only by a secondary inclination and, so to speak, out of a superabundance of strength.

(3) In saying that an object is attained "by reason of its own nature" or else that it is attained "by reason of the primary object," we add a new aspect to the distinction between primary and secondary. 'To attain an object "by reason of its own nature"' means that the bent or innate inclination by which a faculty or habit is carried towards an object first off is altogether independent of any prior inclination of the same faculty. By contrast, 'to attain an object "by reason of the primary object"' means that the faculty's inclination towards the secondary object depends upon its inclination towards the primary object. For example, this double inclination is very clear in the way in which volition bears upon the end and the means. For the end is attained by reason of its own nature, because the end moves the will by its own nature; but the means as means is not attained by reason of its own nature but rather by reason of the end, since the means do not move the will save by

the end.⁵ This dependency, however, of the inclination towards the secondary object upon the inclination towards the primary object does not always mean that the faculty or habit cannot attain the secondary object in exercised act without having previously attained the primary object in exercised act; for sometimes this dependency belongs solely to the order of intention. Hence 'to be the primary or secondary object of a faculty or habit' does not pertain so much to the order of execution as to the order of intention.

(4) We say that an object is attained "as that by which a faculty or habit is specified" in the case of a primary object, or else "as something extraneous to what properly specifies the faculty or habit," in the case of a secondary object. We say these things in order to indicate that, in its own essence, a faculty or habit is commensurated to its primary object; vice-versa, the primary object imparts to the faculty or habit its specific difference. Nothing of the kind can be said of a secondary object.

In order to understand more fully the specification of a faculty or habit, keep in mind two points.

(a) All entities are placed in their proper species by intrinsic differences. Nevertheless, there is a great difference between absolute

⁵The difference between the way in which a bodily faculty like vision bears upon its formal/material object and the way in which a spiritual faculty like the will bears upon its primary/secondary object can be brought out as follows. Whereas I see Jones only and simply in seeing a patch of color (which color is an accident of Jones), I do not will the means solely and simply in willing the end. After all, the means are not parts or accidents of the end. Rather, having (primarily) willed the end, I must still (secondarily) will each means distinctly and in itself, even though I will them for the sake of the end.

entities and relative entities. The differences constitutive of absolute entities are themselves utterly absolute, having nothing to do with any extrinsic term or relatum. But the differences constitutive of relative entities are nothing but relations themselves, relations to something extrinsic -- e.g. bents or tendencies. So when we say that the habit is specified by its formal object, we do not mean to say that the object itself is the specific difference constitutive of the habit but rather that the object is the extrinsic standard and rule to which the habit bespeaks an essential relation, by which relation the habit itself is intrinsically constituted in its own species. And this relation is proportioned to and adequated to the object.

Whence a corollary of great importance: a habit or faculty is specified by its primary/formal object already in the order of intention, that is, prior to attaining that object in exercised act; a faculty or habit comes into being precisely in order that it might tend toward such an object; so, prior to actually attaining it in exercised act, the faculty or habit is already constituted in its own nature.

(b) A potency or habit is specified by its object and also by its own proper act concurrently and by virtue of the following order which exists between the object and the act. The object does not specify except insofar as it is attainable by acts, and the acts do not specify in any other way than as attainments of an object. So, what immediately specifies an act is its object, and what immediately specifies a potency (faculty) or habit is its act.

However, one has to distinguish two series of acts, namely, primary and secondary. The "primary" acts of a habit or faculty are those which nature produced the faculty or habit in order to elicit, and by which its primary object is attained. Its "secondary" acts are those to whose eliciting the fa-

culty or habit was not ordered by its very nature, but which it elicits only out of its superabundance of strength and through which it attains its secondary object(s). Now it is not the case that a habit is specified immediately by just any sort of act; it is specified only by those acts through which the primary object is attained. And this should make it clear why a faculty or habit is said to bear upon its primary object "as that which specifies it," while the secondary objects are outside the line of specification.⁶

~2~

Now let us look at the subdivisions of "primary" or "formal object."

Because a potency or habit can be related in various ways to its formal object, we may distinguish various features in that sort of object. To understand this, it helps to notice the difference between the divine intellect and the human.

On account of the pre-eminence of its power, the divine intellect knows in one, unique act everything about everything knowable; but the human intellect only knows a thing successively, by forming different and successive sentences, or by explicating various things predicated of the thing-to-be-known. (St. Thomas, ST I, q. 14, a. 14)

For this reason, in each and every human intellectual habit, the formal object has to be considered under two aspects: incomplexly and complexly.

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'Formal object considered incomplexly' means the entity about which the

⁶In other words, my knowing is a genus of my acts; my knowing Jones is a species of my knowing-acts. My acts which belong to that species belong to it by virtue of their object, Jones. This is what is meant by saying that the object specifies the act. (In a moment it will become clear that, in fact, any act of knowing Jones is an act of knowing that something is true of Jones, so that the object which places an act of knowing in its species is always a "complex"; but more of that anon.) In turn, my being able to function is the genus of my faculties; my being able to know is a specific faculty (intellect) within that genus. It is specified as the faculty which it is by virtue of the fact that the acts which actuate it are acts-of-knowing (intellections).

habit acquires knowledge through various sentences. It is this entity which is properly called the subject of predication of the habit in question, for it is subjected to the predicates which the habit manifests about it. Thus the subject of metaphysics is ens.

'Formal object considered complexly' on the contrary means the very sentences or propositions which arise out of the coalescence of that entity as subject with various attributions as predicates. Thus the formal object complexly taken of metaphysics (as a habit) is the several sentences which metaphysics (as a science) demonstrates about ens.⁷

Now let us look at both sorts of object separately.

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The incomplex formal object. Even if this object is in itself an utterly simple entity, we may be able to discern in it several virtually distinct formalities. Thus in ens we discern the grounds (rationes) for calling it the true, the good, the beautiful, etc. So whenever the subject is such that we can discern various formalities in it, it may easily happen that the incomplex formal object terminates the faculty's or habit's relation to it per se according to only one of these formalities, and not according to all of them. Thus it is according to the ground or formality of "the good" that being (ens) terminates the will's relation to it, while is only according to the ground of "the true" (or "the real") that being terminates the intellect's relation to it.

So, in the habit's subject or incomplex formal object itself, it is necessary to distinguish between two things: (a) the subject itself, and (b) the ground, note or formality in the subject upon which the faculty or habit pri-

⁷The Thomistic distinction between incomplex and complex objects corresponds to the contemporary distinction between accusative knowing (knowing Jones) and knowing-that (e.g., knowing that Jones is a truck driver).

marily bears. The former is usually called "the formal object quod (takeⁿ in-complexly)" or "the subject of attribution." The latter, however is usually called "the formal ratio quae." (Of course, if it so happens that we cannot distinguish different formalities in the subject, there is no particular need to keep these terms distinct.)

-b-

The complex formal object. We have said that this object consists of the sentences which the habit forms and verifies concerning its subject. Now it may happen that concerning one and the same subject, considered according to one and the same formal ratio quae, not one ~~but~~ several different habits form and verify the same sentences. For example, concerning God (the "subject" or "formal object quod") according to the note of deity ("formal ratio quae"), the same propositions are verified by the habit of theology, by the habit of faith, and by the Beatific Vision. So, over and above these propositions, there has to be another formal ratio by virtue of which these assertibles belong to one habit rather than another.

Hence within the scope of the formal object taken as complex, we must distinguish two things: (a) that which the habit properly verifies about its subject, i.e. the complex object itself, and (b) that through which this same object is made attainable (verifiable) by this rather than that habit. The former is usually called "the formal object quod (complexly taken)," while the latter is called either "the formal object quo" or "the formal ratio sub qua" or the "objective motive."

The formal ratio sub qua, therefore, is the objective light under which the formal object quod is manifested (shown as true) to the faculty or habit, or, under which it is made to be attainable by the faculty or habit, and through which the faculty is moved to attain it.

B. Classification of the Object Relative to an Act

Since "known things are in the knower according to the mode of the knower," and since our intellect's mode of knowing is to know the truth about an object by predicating and denying predicates, it is obvious that the object of our intellectual acts (e.g. of the assent of faith) is always something complex, a proposition.⁸ Such a complex is manifested to us under a particular objective light. Hence it follows that in the object of an act we must distinguish two things: (a) the complex object attained, and (b) the object by which that complex is attained. Thus the object of an act is divided into the object quod and the object quo (a.k.a. the formal ratio sub qua).

Now how do these two "sorts" of act-object relate to the correspondingly named "sorts" of faculty- or habit-object?

The object quo of an act is always the same as the object quo of the faculty or habit whose act it is.

However, the object quod of an act does not always coincide with the formal object quod of the habit or faculty whose act it is. How is this possible?

Well, just as we have distinguished, for any cognoscitive habit, a primary or formal object from a secondary or material object, so also we must distinguish among the acts of the same habit primary acts and secondary acts.

⁸I have underlined this sentence because of its philosophical importance. It is the opinion of the Salmanticenses; and if they are correct, then Thomistic doctrine holds that there is no act of accusative knowing (intellection) or believing. Rather, every act of knowing and every act of believing has a proposition for its object. Thus every act of knowing Jones is an act of knowing that some sentence about Jones is true (or, possibly, that some state of affairs has Jones as a constituent). Does it follow that no simple understanding is a fully terminated act of knowing? So it would seem.

'Primary acts' are those acts for the eliciting of which the faculty or habit exists and in relation to which it is specified and defined. Thus simple volition is the primary act of the will. In these acts the proper nature of the habit shines forth, and its proper relationality is manifested.

'Secondary acts' are those which do not specify the habit or faculty and do not enter into its definition but which rather follow from the primary acts, in whose power they are contained. Thus choice is a secondary act of the will. (cf. St. Thomas, ST, II-II, q. 28, a. 4)

Now look: primary acts have as their object quod the very same thing which is the formal object quod (complexly taken) of the faculty or habit; for, as already noted, the habit or faculty is only specified by this object by way of such acts. But secondary acts, by the very fact that they are such, have to deal immediately and primarily with a secondary object; and as a result, that which is only secondary or material object with respect to the faculty or habit is formal and primary object with respect to the secondary act itself, since it does specify the act. As the Salmanticenses say (in Tract. VIII, De Ultimo Fine, disp. I, n. 86): "An act is not called secondary because it itself secondarily and materially attains a secondary object ... but because it per se and primarily attains as its own formal object what is a secondary or material object of the potency (faculty) whose act it is."

C. On Getting Straight the Six Things Each of Which is

Sometimes Called the Formal Ratio Sub Qua

The following chart shows all the features or formalities which are indiscriminately called "formal ratio sub qua" by sloppy writers.

(I) Something given on the part of the faculty or habit itself (e.g.

the light of the agent intellect)

(II) Something given on the part of the object, namely, one of the following:

- (1) the reason for knowability (i.e. the thing's abstractability)
- (2) the object's intrinsic knowability (i.e. its reality)
- (3) the medium of cognition, which is one of the following:
 - (a) medium quo (= impressed species)
 - (b) medium in quo (= either image or expressed species)
 - (c) medium sub quo (= evidence, derivability, testimony, etc.)

As to (I), when 'formal ratio sub qua' is used to mean something given on the part of the faculty of habit itself, the expression refers to the very light or actuality by which the faculty is ordered and actuated to its proper object. In the case of our natural knowing, this "formal ratio" is the light of the agent intellect, which stands in the same relation to the possible intellect as the light of the sun stands to the eye. But in the case of the Beatific Vision, this "formal ratio" is the light of glory.

As to (II), when 'formal ratio sub qua' is used to mean something given on the part of the object, the expression refers to something objective, which precedes the faculty or habit itself, forms its nature and originates its act. One is referring to an objective feature which proportions and adapts the object to the faculty or act. If we are talking about the intellect, this objective feature might be any of the following three things.

Sometimes 'formal ratio sub qua' is used to name the very root of knowability for an object (as in II. 1), and this is generally agreed to con-

sist in the thing's objective abstractability-in-various-ways. One acknowledges that there is present in the object a basis for terminating and representing it immaterially in various ways.

Sometimes 'ratio formalis sub qua' is used to mean the very knowability which is intrinsic to an object (as in II. 2), and this knowability or intelligibility seems to be nothing other than the "transcendental truth" of being. (If the faculty in question is the will, then the willability intrinsic to an object is transcendental goodness.)

Sometimes (II.3.1.), there is the means by which one knows, and this is the intelligible form by which the intellect is determined to an object; thus through the form of a stone, the intellect is determined to know a stone. This form is the species impressa (impressed species).

Then there is the means or medium in which one knows a thing (II.3.2.), and this may be either a material thing or a spiritual thing. If it is a material thing, it is something situated outside the faculty but in which there is a likeness or image of the thing-to-be-known, as in a mirror; if it is a spiritual thing, it is inside the faculty and is the expressed species or verbum mentis in which the thing is known.

Finally, there is the means or medium under which something is known (II.3.3.), and this is the very thing which we have already discussed under the term, 'formal ratio sub qua.' This is the ratio through which an object is manifested to a faculty or constituted as an object proportionate to and attainable by that faculty, and through which the faculty is causally moved to attain that object. Philosophy teaches us that in order for a truth or an object to be known, or in order for the intellect to elicit an act of cognition anent some object, there has to be present, on the part of the object itself,

some ratio which manifests the truth of the object to the intellect or constitutes it as an attainable object and moves the intellect. Thus in natural knowing, the intellect is not able to know any truth unless this truth is shown; it may be shown in itself (immediate evidence, obviousness) or in another truth from which it may be deduced (derivability) or in the honest testimony of someone else.

Now for any cognitive act, it is not hard to see the crucial importance of this formal ratio sub qua, which is identically the objective medium sub quo of cognition. Remember that this formal ratio does two duties. It does an objective duty, whereby it constitutes an act's formal object quod as attainable by that act and as specificative of that act. But then it also does a causal duty, whereby it moves the faculty to attain its formal object quod. Therefore, this "formal ratio sub qua" formally causes a true and certain judgment in our minds regarding any truth -- so much so that, take it away, and the whole certitude of our knowing collapses, but, supply it, and we are able to elicit an act of knowing. And the more sure and firm is this formal ratio sub qua, the more firm is our knowing what we know. Hence, this formal ratio sub qua is the foundation and formal cause of the certitude of our every cognition.