

**Studi**  
**sull'Aristotelismo**  
**medievale**  
**(secoli VI-XVI)**



2021 | 1

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Numero di registrazione: 176/2021 del 20/10/21, Tribunale di Roma

ISSN 2785-5066

ISBN 978-88-9295-354-3

Periodicità annuale

Prima edizione: dicembre 2021

tab edizioni

© 2021 Gruppo editoriale Tab s.r.l.

viale Manzoni 24/c

00185 Roma

[www.tabedizioni.it](http://www.tabedizioni.it)

Stampato da The Factory s.r.l.

via Tiburtina 912

00156 Roma

per conto del Gruppo editoriale Tab s.r.l.

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# Studi sull'Aristotelismo medievale (secoli VI-XVI)

anno 1, numero 1, dicembre 2021

a cura di ALESSANDRO D. CONTI  
e CECILIA TRIFOGLI

UNIVERSITÀ



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# Aquinas' distinction between *abstractio* and *separatio* in *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 3<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Aquinas' *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 3 is a well-known article for its distinction between *abstractio* and *separatio*, and especially for the connection it draws between *separatio* and metaphysics. This connection, scholarship has argued, would be due to the foundational role that *separatio* is supposed to play with respect to metaphysics, so that the possibility itself of metaphysics as a distinct science would be grounded on the possibility of *separatio*. The present article is meant to discuss the possibility of *separatio* and the reasons behind its connection to metaphysics against the background of a wider analysis of *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 3. It falls into four parts: [I] after a survey of scholarship, [II] it presents Aquinas' text and [III] focuses on a particular point emerging from it, [IV] drawing in the end some conclusions about *separatio*.

In *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 3, Aquinas establishes a distinction between two ways in which the intellect can abstract one thing from another, calling them *abstractio* and *separatio*, respectively. After distinguishing, in turn, two kinds of *abstractio*, at the end of the article Aquinas draws a connection between the two kinds of *abstractio* and *separatio*, on one hand, and the theoretical sciences,

1. I am grateful to Amos Bertolacci, Cecilia Trifogli, and Martin Pickavé for reading and discussing different versions of the present paper.

on the other. The reasons behind this connection have been the object of much debate in scholarship, especially as far as *separatio* is concerned. As a matter of fact, Aquinas does not explicitly explain the connection himself; as for *separatio*, he simply states that it belongs to metaphysics, without clarifying the role, if any, it would play within this science or, more generally, in connection with it. The speculation about this in scholarship, on the other hand, revolves around one main point, alternatively maintained and rejected in different variants by scholars, namely that *separatio* should be deemed as the operation by means of which the subject of metaphysics is first discovered. Since the subject of a science must be assumed, rather than investigated, in that science, claiming that the subject of metaphysics is discovered through *separatio* is tantamount to stating that *separatio* makes metaphysics possible as a philosophical discipline in the first place. As it may contain such an important piece of evidence concerning the possibility of metaphysics according to Aquinas, *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 3 has deserved much attention in scholarly discussions on the epistemological status of metaphysics, albeit it was admittedly intended by its author to solve an issue concerning mathematics.

In what follows, I would like to discuss about the question of *separatio* and its connection with metaphysics in the context of a thorough analysis of *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 3. First, I shall outline the scholarly debate on the role of *separatio* in metaphysics. In the second section, I shall provide a discussion of Aquinas' *solutio* of q. 5 a. 3. In the third section, I shall make further remarks on a particular point emerging from Aquinas' text; finally, I will try to draw some conclusions concerning the attribution of *separatio* to metaphysics.

## 1. Status quaestionis

In *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 1, Aquinas divides the objects of speculative philosophy into [a] those which depend on sensible matter *secundum esse* and [b] those which do not. The former are further



divided into [aa] objects which depend on sensible matter *secundum intellectum* and [ab] objects which do not. Following this division, speculative philosophy is divided into [aa] physics, [ab] mathematics, and [b] metaphysics. In particular, metaphysics investigates all objects which do not depend on matter *secundum esse*, including both [b.1] those which never exist in matter, like God and angels, and [b.2] those which can exist both in matter and not in matter, like substance, being, and so on (I will follow previous scholarship in referring to [b.1] and [b.2] as “positively” and “negatively” immaterial, respectively<sup>2</sup>). In *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 4, devoted to “divine science”<sup>3</sup>, Aquinas makes it clear that metaphysics investigates into both [b.1] and [b.2], but in a different way: as for [b.2], they are taken into account as the “subjects” of metaphysics (though earlier in the same article Aquinas had been more accurate in stating that being *qua* being is the subject of metaphysics); as for [b.1], they are taken into account as the principles of the subject of metaphysics. The other two articles of *quaestio* 5 are devoted to physics (q. 5 a. 2) and mathematics (q. 5 a. 3), respectively. In particular, q. 5 a. 3 is intended to clarify whether mathematics investigates into what exists in matter, but considering it without matter. Explaining this feature of mathematics, which apparently consists in investigating into some things in a way which is different from the way they are, is the ultimate goal of Aquinas' article and the reason why he elaborates the distinction between *abstractio* and *separatio* in the first place.

However, the final ascription of *separatio* to metaphysics has probably been the issue most debated by scholarship. The debate originated with an article by L.-B. Geiger<sup>4</sup>, the first to maintain that *separatio* is required in order to discover being *qua* being. Some points of his approach need to be highlighted in greater detail.

2. See Wippel (1984); Wippel (2000). The distinction at stake is found in Avicenna's *Logica* I 1.

3. In the article, Aquinas will eventually distinguish two “divine sciences”, namely philosophical theology and the “theology of the Holy Scripture”. See Porro (2007a, p. 487ff.).

4. The article was published in 1947. I quote it from the reprint Geiger (2000). For a survey of earlier studies related to *separatio*, see Schmidt (1960, pp. 373-374).

First, he claims that *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 3 would deal with the “subjective aspect”<sup>5</sup> of the division of sciences, which had already been analysed from an “objective point of view” in q. 5 a. 1. Second, the connection between the subjective and the objective points of view would lie in the fact that *separatio* is the subjective act through which the immateriality of being, the object of metaphysics, is established. *Separatio* is thus expressly linked to being<sup>6</sup> and would consist in denying that it depends on matter in existence. Third, this negative judgement would be vital to begin metaphysics, insofar as metaphysics exists as a science higher than physics exactly because of the existence of immaterial beings. Fourth, in order to state the immateriality of being by *separatio* some objective ground would be needed<sup>7</sup>: in particular, one must have already established the existence of immaterial beings in physics. Fifth, the main reason why a negative judgement, rather than simple abstraction, would be needed in order to attain the subject of metaphysics is that only in virtue of a judgement the immateriality of being may be properly comprehended<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the transcendental character of being would prevent its notion from being attained through abstraction, insofar as it should abstract from both matter and immaterial realities, which are beings themselves<sup>9</sup>.

As for the fifth point, other scholars have developed Geiger’s explanations (and provided new ones) of the reason why *separatio*, rather than abstraction, would be needed to grasp being *qua* being<sup>10</sup>;

5. Geiger employs the term “subject” in its modern meaning; by contrast, he refers to being as to the object, rather than the subject, of metaphysics.

6. Even though not exclusively; see Geiger (2000, p. 152): «[...] la possibilité pour l'être ou la substance ou toute autre notion de ce genre d'être sans matière corporelle».

7. Geiger mentions some texts from Aquinas’ *Commentary on the Metaphysics* to support this point; see Geiger (2000, pp. 163-164).

8. Geiger contrasts “concevoir l'immatérialité négative de l'être” with “concevoir immatériellement l'être” and maintains that simple abstraction can attain only the latter. See Geiger (2000, p. 163 and p. 168).

9. Cf. also Robert (1947, pp. 216-217).

10. Oeing-Hanhoff (1963), for example, maintains that the concept of being achieved by means of abstraction is not the subject of metaphysics, but of dialectics, and that *separatio* permits the transition from the subject of dialectics to the subject of metaphysics. He also maintains that it is not absolutely certain, before *separatio* takes

I shall only outline Wippel's position in some detail. Before doing this, however, I would focus on the fourth point, namely Geiger's view that *separatio* presupposes the existence of positively immaterial beings. Since Geiger also maintains that *separatio* is needed to establish the subject of metaphysics, he must conclude that the existence of immaterial beings must be presupposed by metaphysics, as something demonstrated before the properly metaphysical enquiry begins<sup>11</sup>. Now, this view has been criticised by both Wippel and Aertsen on a common basis, but with different conclusions. The common basis is the observation that positively immaterial beings are, in Aquinas' view, the principles of the subject of metaphysics<sup>12</sup>. Aquinas states this several times in his works, while also maintaining that every science seeks the principles of its subject. Accordingly, positively immaterial beings are the goal of metaphysical enterprise, rather than its starting-point. Geiger's view on *separatio*, in other words, reverses the order of scientific enquiry in metaphysics<sup>13</sup>.

The conclusions Wippel and Aertsen draw from this are very different. From among the premises of Geiger's argument, Wippel

place, that being is common beyond the physical realm. Owens (1972), by contrast, maintains that *separatio* is necessary inasmuch as only a judgement allows one to know something as being. He also states that Conceptualisation can know something until the category of substance, and that going beyond this requires a judgement. Maurer (1986) connects the significance of *separatio* with the "existential character" of the subject of metaphysics. Zimmermann (1998) also embraces the idea that metaphysics is based on *separatio*.

11. In particular, demonstrated in physics. Wippel observes that this would make metaphysics dependent on physics in a stronger sense than the one implied by Aquinas' usual explanations concerning the order of learning. See Wippel (1984), pp. 95-102.

12. See especially Thomas Aquinas, *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 4 (P.-M. Gils ed. in *Opera omnia*, t. L, Commissio Leonina-Éditions du Cerf, Roma-Paris 1992), q. 5 a. 4; Thomas Aquinas, *In Metaph.*, Prooemium (*In XII libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, M.-R. Cathala and R.M. Spiazzi edd., Marietti, Taurini 1964). Aquinas states that not only God, but also separate substances are principles of the subject of metaphysics. For an explanation of how separate substances can be principles of the subject of metaphysics, even though they must fall within its scope, see Doolan (2011).

13. See Wippel (1984, pp. 82-102); Aertsen (1994, pp. 231-232). See Wippel, in particular, for a comprehensive analysis of the evidence in Aquinas' texts. As for the texts Geiger quotes in support of his thesis, Wippel (1984, pp. 83-88) observes that Aquinas is writing as a commentator of Aristotle and therefore he is not necessarily expressing his own views. See also Porro (2007a, pp. 468-469) for an account of Wippel's and Aertsen's criticism of Geiger's position.

drops the view that *separatio* presupposes the existence of positively immaterial beings, while Aertsen drops the thesis that *separatio* is needed in order to discover the subject of metaphysics.

In Wippel's account, *separatio* would be needed in order to discover the subject of metaphysics, being *qua* being: before this discovery, the comprehension one can have of being would not have been freed from the restriction to matter yet, making it impossible to undertake the investigation proper to the science of what is not dependent on matter<sup>14</sup>. Wippel also develops one of Geiger's points about why *separatio*, rather than abstraction, should be the operation through which being *qua* being is discovered: were the concept of being *qua* being reached by a process of abstraction, some unacceptable consequences would follow. In particular, one should abstract from existence itself, which must be retained in the notion of being, "that which is"; one should abstract from individuating differences, from specific differences and from the differences between categories, which in fact fall under the notion of being<sup>15</sup>. In addition to these similarities, there is also a clear-cut difference between Geiger's and Wippel's approaches – and a decisive one. In Wippel's view, *separatio* would not presuppose the existence of a positively immaterial being. Reasoning from Aquinas' statement that *separatio* obtains even when something can exist without something else, he concludes that such a judgement must consist in distinguishing between two different "intelligible contents": that by reason of which something enjoys being, on one hand, and that by reason of which something enjoys a given kind of being, namely material being, on the other<sup>16</sup>. This distinction would be sufficient to establish the science of metaphysics: as far as one can draw it, even the same material being can be studied in two different

14. Cf. also Schmidt (1960), p. 377ff., for the view that the notion of being which precedes *separatio* is not the subject of metaphysics.

15. See Wippel (2000, pp. 48-49).

16. See Wippel (1984, pp. 102-104), and, for a more extensive treatment, Wippel (2000, pp. 51-62).

respects (namely insofar as it is a material being and insofar as it enjoys being at all) and therefore in two sciences<sup>17</sup>.

By contrast, Aertsen reckons that *separatio* would presuppose the existence of immaterial beings<sup>18</sup>: since these are the goal of metaphysics, he concludes that its subject cannot be grounded on *separatio*. It would rather be founded, according to Aertsen, by the “reflexive analysis” Aquinas names *resolutio secundum rationem*, which moves from effects to intrinsic causes and eventually reaches being<sup>19</sup>. As for the actual discussion of *separatio*, it would belong to a text in which Aquinas expresses a theological conception of first philosophy (*theologische Synthese*), based on transmateriality, which is in fact secondary to his main metaphysical conception (*metaphysische Synthese*), based on transcendentality. Having said this, Aertsen also provides a general interpretation of the distinction between *abstractio* and *separatio*, which must be mentioned here. Just like Geiger before him, Aertsen points to the parallel between the division of sciences in q. 5 a. 1 and the distinction between *abstractio* and *separatio* in q. 5 a. 3. This distinction, he claims, would exactly correspond to the bipartition of the objects of speculative philosophy in q. 5 a. 1: [a] some depend on matter *secundum esse*, [b] others do not. To the former, Aertsen goes on, abstraction applies; to the latter it does not, since they are separated<sup>20</sup>.

Aertsen is not the only scholar who has called into question the significance of the doctrine of *separatio* within Aquinas'

17. Wippel (2000, pp. 60-61); Wippel makes this point in answering the objection that the mere possibility of immaterial beings would not be sufficient to ground the science of metaphysics. The objection is in Weisheipl (1985, p. 700); see Wippel (2000, p. 60 n. 114).

18. At least in Aertsen (1994, p. 231 and p. 236).

19. See Aertsen (1994, pp. 233-236); Aertsen (1996, pp. 130-136). For *resolutio* see also Aertsen (1989). Oeing-Hanhoff maintains that it is the subject of dialectics, rather than metaphysics, that is reached at the end of the process of *resolutio secundum rationem* (which consists, according to him, in nothing more than a conceptual analysis); accordingly, he also maintains that *separatio* is needed to move to the subject of metaphysics. See Aertsen's works mentioned above for a critique of these statements (in particular, *resolutio secundum rationem* is not a conceptual analysis and it is indeed meant to reach the subject of metaphysics).

20. See Aertsen (1994, p. 230).

metaphysical project. For example, Porro has claimed that the act Aquinas calls *separatio* is adequate only as far as [b.1] the class of positively immaterial beings is concerned. As for the other class of immaterial realities, namely [b.2] the class of what is negatively immaterial, abstraction would be more suitable than separation, insofar as their immateriality would consist in the fact that matter does not belong to their definition<sup>21</sup>: Porro hypothesises that Aquinas eventually applies to metaphysics as a whole what was originally destined only for its theological part<sup>22</sup>.

It seems to me that Aertsen is completely right in maintaining that the distinction between *abstractio* and *separatio* is basically meant to mirror the distinction between what is dependent on matter *secundum esse* and what is not. Also, it seems to me that Aertsen is right in maintaining that it is Aquinas' account of *resolutio secundum rationem* which is meant to explain the process through which human intellects reach the subject of metaphysics. The significance and the role played by *resolutio*, however, as well as the relation between commonness and immateriality<sup>23</sup>, are questions lying beyond the scope of the present paper. In what follows, I will not make assumptions on the relevance of *resolutio*. I will rather focus on the problems concerning *separatio* as they emerged in this *status quaestionis*, discussing them within a wider analysis of the distinction between *abstractio* and *separatio* in *Super De Trinitate* q. 5 a. 3<sup>24</sup>.

21. See Porro (2007b, pp. 550-551; 2011, pp. 284-286).

22. See Porro (2011, p. 301).

23. For some comments on this, see Porro (2007a, pp. 497-498).

24. The following analysis of Aquinas' article is not a full-fledged commentary: in fact, it only focuses on some aspects which are relevant, I believe, to an assessment of the significance of *separatio*. In particular, I will restrict my attention to Aquinas' text, without discussing its sources and its similarities/dissimilarities with other texts. For a discussion of Avicenna as a source for Aquinas' distinction between *abstractio* and *separatio*, see Porro (2007b, p. 554ff.; 2011); for a discussion of parallels in other 13<sup>th</sup>-century texts, see Lafleur and Carrier (2000, 2010).

*L'evolversi degli studi sulla filosofia medievale negli ultimi cento anni ha "selezionato" due modelli interpretativi principali: quello degli storici della cultura e delle idee, e quello degli storici della filosofia. I primi tendono a spiegare un testo filosofico nei termini di un prodotto culturale del suo tempo e utilizzano come strumenti privilegiati d'indagine la filologia e la storia; per essi comprendere un testo filosofico o teologico medievale significa sostanzialmente collocarlo nel suo contesto storico ed individuare il ruolo che giocava al suo interno, mettendolo in relazione con le sue fonti, esplicite ed implicite, e con altri testi scritti nello stesso periodo. È la via dell'erudizione. Gli storici della filosofia, invece, pur pienamente consapevoli dell'importanza del contesto storico e culturale dei testi studiati, e del valore sussidiario di filologia e storia della cultura per la comprensione dello sviluppo interno dei dibattiti filosofici medievali, si concentrano sulle tesi e sugli argomenti elaborati per sostenerle o confutarle; aspirano a ricostruire la logica interna delle argomentazioni principali; mostrano come quei testi possano essere ancor oggi rilevanti; e gettano, per conseguenza, come un ponte tra le discussioni filosofiche medievali e quelle del nostro tempo. È la via della filosofia. In questa prospettiva, il linguaggio e i metodi della filosofia analitica risultano fondamentali per far emergere con chiarezza e "tradurre" il senso delle tesi sostenute e verificare la tenuta delle argomentazioni elaborate.*

*Studi sull'Aristotelismo medievale (secoli VI-XVI) è una rivista aperta a studi rigorosi di entrambe le impostazioni, che aspira a divenire, nel tempo, un punto di riferimento privilegiato per i fautori della via della filosofia.*