

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Correspondence

## ONTOLOGY AND LOGIC

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**E**DITOR: In his review of my book (*Problems for Thomists: The Problem of Species*),<sup>1</sup> Father Gerard Smith focuses attention upon a question which he thinks may sharpen the point at issue between two theories concerning the order and number of specific natures in the world of corporeal substances. As I understand it, this question is: By what sort of division is *ens* divided into *ens naturae* and *ens rationis*? But, as I understand it, only one answer seems to me to be possible to that question, namely, that *ens naturae* and *ens rationis* are genuinely transcendental modes within the analogy of being. Being, divided into the being considered by the metaphysician and the being considered by the logician, is not a *divisum* like, let us say, figure divided into plane and solid, for figure as common to plane and solid geometrical objects is a genus univocally common to its species; whereas being, like unity or truth or goodness, is never a genus divided into species, but a transcendental analogically present in all its analogical modes.

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<sup>1</sup> In THOUGHT (October, 1940) XV, 59, pp. 710-12.

Since the answer I give to Father Smith's question is not the answer he expects me to give, nor the answer he thinks I have implicitly given in my book, there must be some misunderstanding about the issue which Father Smith supposes to exist between M. Maritain and myself. I think I have a clue to that misunderstanding. It turns on M. Maritain's remark, in his Preface to my book, that there is no need to distinguish between two sorts of species, logical and ontological. I agree with M. Maritain and with Father Smith that, using the words "logical species" and "ontological species" to stand for specific concepts (*entia rationis*) and for specific natures (*entia naturae*), we should not regard our words as signifying two *specifically distinct kinds of species*, but only as signifying species as existing in two analogically distinct modes of being—as existing (potentially universal) in individual things and as existing (actually universal) in understandings which have performed the requisite acts of abstraction. But it is perfectly clear that M. Maritain did not mean that there is *no difference* between the way things are and the way they are understood, or between species as ontologically considered (the natures by which two substances are specifically, not numerically, different) and species as logically considered (the concepts by which the specific difference between two substances is understood). In fact, in a footnote to his Preface (fn. 2 on p. x, *op. cit.*), M. Maritain calls attention to the fact

that for the sake of exemplifications the logician often uses practically as *species* many objects of thought (for instance "the dog," *animal latrans*, "the stone," "the lion") which are not necessarily true species in the ontological sense (nor, therefore, in the logical one). In this sense I would agree in distinguishing between "ontological species" and "(improper) logical species."

And more recently in an article in *The Thomist* (January, 1941), concerned with problems raised by my book, M. Maritain seems to agree that the words "logical species" and "ontological species" should occasion no difficulty if they are understood as making a distinction between species as logically considered (whether these be proper or improper) and species as ontologically considered. That such was my only intention in using these phrases was plainly indicated in the book itself (vd. pp. xiii and 12-18; also fn. 163a).

Now since we all agree that logic and metaphysics (or logic and the philosophy of nature) are not the same science, but formally different according to the diversity of their formal objects, the only problem raised by the distinction of species as considered logically and species as considered ontologically must concern the relation

between logic and ontology with respect to the treatment of species. Let me add here that since there is no difference between the way in which M. Maritain and I distinguish species as logical and ontological, there is no difference between us, as Father Smith suggests, with regard to the question of how logic *is distinguished from* metaphysics (or any other ontological knowledge, such as the philosophy of nature). *That is not the question at all.* The question—and the only one here that M. Maritain and I may be answering differently—is how logic *is related to* ontology.

The Thomistic texts, quoted or referred to by Father Smith, do not seem to me to answer this question. One can agree that “the subject of logic extends to everything about which the being of nature is predicated. . . . (so that) the subject of logic is comparable with the subject of philosophy, which is the being of nature” (*In. Meta. Arist.*, Lect. IV, 574), without being able to conclude therefrom concerning the precise character of the relation between a logical and an ontological account of species and genera.

I expressly limited the problem of species, as I undertook to discuss it in my book, to a problem in the philosophy of nature. There is such a problem, I contended, because there *appear* to be two sets of *possible* answers—possible for Thomists, as well as possible in general—to questions concerning the number and order of real species (species ontologically considered, the specific natures of, and only subsisting in, individual corporeal substances). To the question concerning the number of real species, the two possible answers can be summarized by the following propositions : (I) a small and definitely known number ; (II) a large indefinite number. To the question concerning the order of real species, the two answers can be summarized by the following propositions: (I) a perfect hierarchy in which no two specific natures include a common generic element which is determined and penetrated by their diverse differences; (II) an imperfect hierarchy in which two or more specific natures include a common generic element which is determined and penetrated by their diverse differences.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The summary given above accurately represents the issue as it is formulated in my book. But *now* (some weeks after writing the letter to which this footnote is being added) I know that that formulation contains an error. The theory of a perfect hierarchy does not require the denial of a generic nature common to two specific natures; on the contrary, such a denial must be avoided if the theory of a perfect hierarchy is to be truly formulated. With this error corrected, there is still a genuine issue between the two positions, for though they both agree concerning a common generic nature (in ontology) and a common genus

Now the two theories, here signified by I and II, and inadequately because too briefly summarized in the propositions stated, constitute an issue in the philosophy of nature. That it is an issue in the philosophy of nature, and not in epistemology or logic, is indicated by the fact that the pros and cons which I have carefully set forth in Chapters VII and VIII appeal only to ontological principles and to the observed facts of the sensible world. Perhaps it can be resolved; perhaps it cannot. Perhaps the first theory is true; perhaps the second. But certainly nothing that a logician *qua* logician can say about species and genera (as those are considered within the scope of his science) will be decisive. *To consult the logician about this issue is to beg the question about the relation between logic and ontology, between an account of logical intentions and an account of existing natures.*

In short, the problem raised by Father Smith, concerning the relation of logic to ontology with respect to species, can only be solved in the light of a prior resolution of the problem of species as that occurs in the philosophy of nature. Thus, if M. Maritain and I disagree about how the logical account of species and genera compares with the ontological account of the ordering of specific natures, it is because we disagree, in the first instance, about the kind of hierarchy which orders specific natures (perfect or imperfect, as indicated above); the reverse is not the case, and cannot be the case, namely, that we disagree about the number or order of species ontologically considered because we disagree about the logical analysis of such intentions as species, genera, and differences. And whether we disagree or agree about the relation between the ontological and the logical accounts of species will depend upon the views we hold of the ordering of species, as ontologically considered and as logically considered. Of course, we must accept as an axiom the principle that the logical account should parallel the ontological account (because “modes of predication follow modes of

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(in logic), they do not agree in the way they conceive what is generically common or its differentiation into species. I now can see that the real point of Father Smith’s criticism was this error of mine, for, as a result of making it, I wrongly supposed that the truth of the first theory required a strange discrepancy between the real order of natures and the logical order of concepts. *That is not the case.* The relation between the two orders, and between ontology and logic, is precisely the same for the first theory as for the second. I am now more grateful than ever to Father Smith; for his criticism helped me to correct this error. I hope that its correction will remove a stumbling block in the way of his seeing the issue in the philosophy of nature—the true issue which remains after the first theory is rectified in the direction of its disagreement with the second.

being”); yet it remains necessary to resolve the ontological issues *first*, since logic follows ontology, not ontology logic. *If* the position I have indicated by (I) is correct, and *if* logic must reflect ontology, then there is a problem in consequence about the correctness of traditional logic on some points. But it cannot be argued that *because* logic does reflect ontology, and *because* traditional logic says some things which are inconsistent with the position indicated by (I), *therefore* that position is incorrect. The minor premise here cannot be thus interpreted.

I repeat: the precise way in which the logical account of species should follow the ontological account can only be discussed *after* the issue between opposing ontological accounts is decided, or only in the light of the opposing possibilities. just as the question concerning how many specific natures we know (in terms of real or essential definitions) is necessarily posterior to the question how many real species there are, so the issue between conflicting logical accounts of the way in which diverse species divide a common, proximate genus cannot be resolved prior to a solution of the issue in the philosophy of nature especially that between two views of the hierarchy of substantial species.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Like fn. 2 *supra*, this footnote is a last minute addition. Since writing the foregoing reply to Father Smith, I have not only discovered the error reported in fn. 2 *supra*, but as a result of correcting this error I now think I can *solve* the problem of species. Where before I favored the first theory as more likely, but could not prove it or disprove the second, I now see how the second can be shown to be absolutely untenable, and the first to be true. I shall present these findings in an article to appear in the April issue of *The Thomist*. In that article, I shall deal with the relation of logic to ontology, not as a philosophical problem to be solved, but rather as an historical problem—a problem of accounting for the origin and persistence of an erroneous theory of species. Though this theory (indicated in the text above by II) is equally erroneous in its logical and its ontological dimensions, I suspect that the crucial errors first became codified in traditional logic and then, for many centuries, barred the way to truth in the philosophy of nature.

*We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.*

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