Aquinas and supposition: the possibilities and limitations of logic in divinis

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Medieval theory of supposition, being a part of medieval theory of meaning, has been and remains a subject of particular interest of present-day philosophers. Ever since it was discovered that there are peculiar parallels between modern and medieval theory of meaning, considerable effort has been made to describe its origins and development. The parallel, in short, is a similar distinction between the signification of a word and its actual meaning in use. Frege's conceptual pair of Sinn (sense) and Bedeutung (reference), like Carnap's pair of Intension and Extension (Connotation and Denotation), were discovered to echo the medieval distinctions between Significatio and Appellatio (around 1100), and between Significatio and Suppositio (end 12th and 13th century). Among the many present-day efforts to understand the medievals, the work of L.M. de Rijk is eminent. De Rijk suggests two sources for the theory of supposition, itself a part of...


Quotations are from the edition of Aquinas' work by the Commissio Leonina, if available, and otherwise from the edition contained in Busa's Opera Omnia. Abbreviations used are Busa's as well, whereas numbers in brackets usually refer to the lines of Busa’s edition. Without further reference indicated, reference is made to the corpus articuli or solutio. Scriptum super libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi (SN), Summa contra Gentiles (SeG), Summa Theologiae (ST), Quaestio Disputata De Unione Verbi Incarnati (QDI), QD De Potentia (QDP), QD De Veritate (QDV), QD de Virtutibus in Communi (QDW), Quaestiones Quaestibetales (QDL), Contra Errores Graecorum (OCE), De Rationibus Fidei (ORC), Compendium Theologiae (OTT), In Libros Pericraticae (CPE), In Libros Metaphysicorum (CMP; numbers in brackets refer to Marietti’s edition), In Librum Boethii De Trinitate (GBT), In Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus (CDN), Super Isaiam (CIS), Super Epist. ad Romanos (CRO), Super Evangelium Matthei (REM), Super Evangelium Johannis (REJ), Super Epist. I ad Corinthios (CIC-RIC), Super Epist. ad Ephesios (REP), Super Epist. I ad Timotheum (RT1); De Fallaciis (DP3), De Natura Generis (DPG).
the **terminist logic** of the **logica modernorum**: the study of grammar and the study of fallacies.²

There is however a considerable gap in our knowledge of the theory of supposition. Apart from theologians like Anselm, Abélard, Gilbert of Poitiers and others from the 11th and 12th century, no recent study has been made of the great theologians of the 13th century. I would suggest one reason: another parallel between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century has obstructed our vision, that between Ockham (and Albert of Saxony) and Russell.³

Like Russell, Ockham tried to devise a logic which was purely formal, attempting to leave all metaphysics out of it, while accusing his predecessors of doing exactly the opposite, to the detriment of logic itself. Subscribing to the Ockhamist view, present-day philosophers skipped the great philosophers/theologians of the thirteenth century, searching for 12th century anticipations of Ockham’s approach. Peter of Spain, who wrote his treatise possibly in the early thirties of the thirteenth century, presented this interpretation with a formidable problem: why does he distinguish a kind of supposition (**suppositio naturalis**) which seems to blur the sharp distinction between signification and supposition? A similar kind of supposition was mentioned by the two other proponents of 13th century logic, William of Sherwood⁴ and Lambert of Auxerre. In my opinion, no satisfactory solutions have been found for this problem of textual and historical interpretation. It seems to me that it will be helpful to investigate the natural

⁴ H.A.G. Braakhuis however has shown that Sherwood’s *suppositio habitualis* cannot be identical with Peter of Spain’s *suppositio naturalis*, as, among others, De Rijk thought, *The Views of William of Sherwood on Some Semantical Topics and Their Relation to Those of Roger Bacon*, in: Vivarium, XV (1977), 111-142.