

A comment on *Principles of Nature*, Chapter 2, §10-11
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In Chapter 2, §10-11, Thomas Aquinas elaborates upon his prior discussion of privation and its role in generation. An old adage helps to illustrate Thomas' treatment of privation:

"You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear"

At first it would seem that we might be able to make the purse out of a pig's ear. After all, we have *matter* – the pig's ear, *form* – "purse-form" (at least as it is known by the efficient cause or purse-maker), and we have *privation* – the absence of "purse-form" in the pig's ear. But the purse-maker finds it impossible to cause the generation of a silk purse. Why?

We must not interpret the lack of purse-form, if by "lack" we mean merely "absence of", as satisfying the necessity for privation before generation may occur. Privation is a lack, but simply having an "absence of" is not a sufficient definition of privation. In things that are properly said to be in privation, we must find already inhering in the subject not only an "absence of" but a "readiness for" or an "aptness for" becoming the proposed object.

Material and formal predisposition or aptness for becoming a silk purse is absolutely necessary in order for the sow's ear to begin the process of becoming a silk purse. But material predisposition is exactly what the sow's ear does not have. You cannot make a silk purse out of "just any subject, [it has to be] a determined [subject]" (*PN*, 2, §11). A predisposed or determined subject, with the proper privation, then, is required in order to undergo generation from "not existing as" to "existing as".

A sow's ear, then, never was meant to be a silk purse because it was never *apt* to be one.