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*The Science of Theology*



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# The Science of Theology

## The Scientific Character of Theology

Granting that there exists a sacred doctrine based on God's Revelation, the next question that St. Thomas poses (*ST I*, q. 1, a. 2) is whether this sacred doctrine should be considered to be a science in the proper sense of the term. Can there be a *science* of the things believed through faith? For many people today, theology does not attain to the status of a science because science is generally equated only with the empirical sciences, such as physics, chemistry, biology, geology, etc. Observation and measurement are the tools of empirical science, and hypotheses are tested through empirical experimentation in order to verify their truth. It is obvious that theology is not an empirical science.

Aristotle, however, understood science in a broader way, as a *systematic body of knowledge of an object*,<sup>1</sup> known through its fundamental causes.<sup>2</sup> Scientific knowledge is generated by coming to understand the *causes* of the objects that we encounter, through inferring conclusions from self-evident first principles<sup>3</sup> grasped by common sense,<sup>4</sup> together with induction from experience. In this sense, the philosophical disciplines are sciences with as much right to the term as the empirical sciences. Metaphysics, the philosophy of man, and ethics are sciences in which conclusions are deduced from evident first principles, and phenomena of experience are understood through grasping their underlying causes.

Can sacred theology, the science of God as grasped by faith and reason, be considered a science in the Aristotelian sense of the word? If it is a science, it must have some self-evident principles and experience from which it infers conclusions. At first glance, it seems that theology

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1 For example, the object of physics is moving bodies; the object of biology is living bodies; the object of chemistry is the composition and properties of bodies; etc.

2 For Aristotle's understanding of scientific knowledge, see his *Posterior Analytics* 1.2.

3 See, for example, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.6.1140b31–34, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, p. 1027: "Scientific knowledge is judgment about things that are universal and necessary, and the conclusions of demonstration, and all scientific knowledge, follow from first principles (for scientific knowledge involves apprehension of a rational ground)." See also *Metaphysics* 1.2.

4 By "common sense" is meant the intuitive knowledge that is *common* to mankind, which is precisely the knowledge of first principles. These include both the speculative first principles, such as something cannot be and not be at the same time in the same way (principle of non-contradiction); every change has a cause; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; etc; and the moral first principles, such as good is to be done and evil avoided; do unto others as you would have them do unto you (the golden rule); what is good for all is more important than what is good for only one (the common good is greater than the private good); God is to be loved above all; etc.

cannot have evident first principles if it is *faith seeking understanding*. After all, does not faith preclude evident principles, since it is belief in what is unseen? How can there be a *science of faith*? St. Thomas poses this very objection in the second article of the *Summa theologiae*:

It seems that sacred theology is not a science. For every science is based on self-evident principles. But sacred theology is based on the articles of faith, which are not self-evident. Indeed, not everyone holds them, "for not all men have faith," as stated in 2 Thessalonians [3:2]. Therefore, sacred theology is not a science.<sup>5</sup>

The objection is a good one. Theology does not appear to possess self-evident principles. Indeed, if Catholic theology were based on self-evident principles, there would be no unbelievers in the world since all would see its truth. And if theology is not based on self-evident principles, it cannot be a science in the Aristotelian sense.

St. Thomas gives his positive solution to the question using an Aristotelian distinction between two types of sciences: principal and subordinate (subaltern). A principal science is one which stands in its own right, by building on its own evident principles. Euclidean geometry, for example, builds on its own axioms and definitions. A subordinate science, on the other hand, takes its principles from a higher science, which it does not question, and develops its own set of conclusions from these "borrowed" principles. Practical sciences and arts are generally of this type, for they take their principles from a theoretical science and apply them for practical ends. Medicine and engineering are the classic examples. Medicine accepts without question the principles from biology and chemistry, and applies them to the practical concerns of curing illnesses. Engineering and architecture receive their principles from mathematics and physics and apply them to the problem of erecting structures capable of withstanding gravity, wind, and other forces. Sciences such as medicine and engineering are considered by Aristotle to be subordinate sciences. Other examples include acoustics, optics, perspective, and music (at least to the extent that the notes of a musical scale are based on mathematical ratios).

How can this distinction be helpful in considering the scientific status of theology? Should it be classified as a principal or a subordinate science? At first sight, one might think that St. Thomas would classify theology as a principal science on account of its great dignity as the science of God who reveals Himself. Indeed, as we shall see below, he holds it to be the queen of all the sciences. However, precisely because it is based on divine Revelation, it is to be classified as a subordinate science that bor-

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5 *ST I*, q. 1, a. 2, obj. 1.

rows its principles from a higher science. However, this higher science from which it borrows is no mere human science. Since theology is the science built on God's self-revelation, it borrows its principles from God's "science" about Himself, which is more properly called *omniscience*. Theology is a science subordinated to God's omniscience, which He shares with mankind through Revelation. On the basis of the principles borrowed from God's Revelation accepted in faith, theology can rationally reflect on God and the ordering of all things to Him. St. Thomas writes:

I respond that sacred theology is a science. But it must be recognized that there are two kinds of sciences. One kind is based on principles that are evident to the light of natural reason, such as arithmetic, geometry, and others of that sort. Another kind is based on principles evident in the light of a higher science, as the art of perspective is based on principles known by geometry, and music is based on principles known by arithmetic.<sup>6</sup> And in this way sacred theology is based on principles known by the light of a higher science, which is the science of God and the blessed. Therefore as music believes principles transmitted to it by mathematicians, so sacred theology believes principles revealed to it by God.<sup>7</sup>

In reply to the objection posed at the beginning, St. Thomas writes: "The principles of any science are either self-evident, or derive from the knowledge of a superior science. And the principles of sacred theology are of the latter kind, as has been said."<sup>8</sup> It is not necessary that the principles of every science be self-evident. It is sufficient that they be received from a higher science in which they are evident or proven.

For the blessed in heaven, and obviously for God, the articles of faith are principles that are most evidently seen. In this way St. Thomas reconciles two apparently opposing aspects of theology. On the one hand, it has an imperfect mode of being a science because it is based on authority and does not "see" the intrinsic evidence of its own principles on which it is built. However, it has a most sublime dignity because it is a science subordinated to the science that God has of Himself and of His creation. Thus sacred theology is the most certain of all the sciences, even though it treats of the most sublime questions, for it participates in the certainty of God's own omniscience.

This solution to the question of the scientific character of theology enables it to maintain a great humility, for the theologian must recognize that he never adequately penetrates into the principles that form the basis of his science. They always remain borrowed principles. Indeed, the entire science of theology is the result of a gratuitous gift given by God to man: His self-revelation and the elevation of man to a supernatural end.

<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas says this because musical scales and harmonies are based on numerical ratios such as 2:1 (the octave); 3:2 (the fifth); 4:3 (the fourth); etc.

<sup>7</sup> *ST I*, q. 1, a. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *ST I*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 1.

However, precisely because of the incapacity of theology to have dominion over its principles, those principles have a divine nobility, for they are "borrowed" from God Himself. Theology's unique greatness and humility go hand in hand. It is humble in that it has no dominion over its own foundation. It is great because its foundation is divine.

Despite the borrowed nature of its principles, theology is similar to other sciences in that, resting on those pillars, it builds a systematic body of knowledge by defining terms, making distinctions, demonstrating corollaries, clarifying through analogy, and defending its conclusions against those who attack them.

## Theology as the Science of God

Theology, like every other science, is defined by the subject it studies. The Greek word "theo-logy" literally means the science of God, the science that has God directly as its object. In *ST I*, q. 1, a. 7, St. Thomas discusses the proper subject studied by theology:

I answer that God is the subject of this science. The relation between a science and its subject is the same as that between a faculty or habit and its object. Properly speaking, that by reason of everything is referred to a faculty or habit is said to be its object. For example, since both a man and a stone are referred to sight insofar as they are colored, color is the proper object of sight. Now everything is treated in sacred theology with reference to God, either because it is God Himself, or because it is ordered to God as its source and end. It follows that God is truly the subject of this science. This is also manifest from the principles of this science, which are the articles of faith that are about God. Now the subject of the first principles of a science and of the entire science are the same, because the whole science is contained virtually in its principles. Some people, however, looking at what is treated in this science rather than that by reason of which it is treated, have described the subject of this science in a different way: as "realities and signs," or "the work of reparation," or "the whole Christ, head and members." All of these things are indeed treated in this science, but in their ordering to God.

Theology not only studies God, but everything else insofar as it is related to God as Creator, Legislator, and Final End. Thus theology also studies creation, by which creatures proceed from God; ethics, by which rational creatures live according to God; and salvation history, by which God intervenes in history to lead human beings to Himself. The many themes studied in theology all relate to its main subject and unifying principle, which is God Himself.<sup>9</sup>

Since sacred theology is the science of God based on His own Revelation of Himself, it is only accessible through the virtue of faith. Thus theology can also be defined as the

<sup>9</sup> See *ST I*, q. 1, a. 7, ad 2: "Whatever other conclusions are reached in this sacred science are comprehended under God, not as parts or species or accidents but as in some way ordered to Him."

science which seeks an understanding of what is known through faith, or *faith seeking understanding* (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Here theology is defined by its special source of knowledge, which is the light of faith illuminating reason. In other words, theology is the science of God (and of creatures in their relation to God), as known through the light of faith and reason.

St. Augustine beautifully explains the relation between reason and faith in theology: “Aiming my efforts according to that rule of faith, as much as I have been able . . . I have sought Thee; I desired to see in understanding what I held by faith.”<sup>10</sup> St. Anselm is well known for continuing this Augustinian understanding of theology, and expresses it in a prayer at the beginning of his *Proslogion*: “I yearn to understand some measure of Your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand [*credo ut intellegam*]. For I believe even this: that unless I believe, I shall not understand.”<sup>11</sup>

Theology can also be understood as the science of Revelation.<sup>12</sup> However, since Revelation is the self-manifestation of God, it is better to hold God, insofar as He can be known through faith and reason, to be the object of theology. The unity of theology can be seen better when it is defined as the science of God, and of all other things in their relation to God. The unity of theology is less evident if it is defined as the science of Revelation. What gives unity to God’s Revelation? Surely that unity comes from its source, which is God Himself.<sup>13</sup>

A quite different definition of theology is given by Bernard Lonergan in *Method in Theology*. He begins by defining theology as that which “mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.”<sup>14</sup> Thus theology is defined not by its object (God who reveals Himself), nor by its source or formal light (Revelation),<sup>15</sup> but through one of its social functions. There is no doubt that this mediation is an important purpose of theology. However, various problems result if theology is defined in this way. First, theology would lose its primary focus on God who reveals Himself—its formal object<sup>16</sup>—and would seem to focus on man’s

self-understanding in relation to his culture and religion. Secondly, it would lose its essential unity that comes from its formal object, for there could be many distinct kinds of mediations between a cultural matrix and religion. Third, the distinction between natural and supernatural theology would be blurred, for both could be understood as mediations between culture and religion. According to this kind of definition, Plato’s philosophy, or Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, would qualify as a theology in much the same way as Catholic theology. Similarly, faith would no longer be a prerequisite for doing theology, understood in this Lonerganian sense. In the Augustinian and Thomistic understanding, on the contrary, supernatural faith is a *sine qua non* for doing sacred theology; faith is its portal, for it alone provides access to God’s revelation. *Fides quaerens intellectum* begins with faith.<sup>17</sup>

## The Unity of Theology

After determining that theology is indeed a scientific study of God who reveals Himself, the next question is whether it is one science or many. Is theology, like philosophy, a genus that comprises a collection of distinct theological sciences, or, on the contrary, is it just one science that has an all-embracing scope? St. Thomas continues to flesh out the notion of theology as a science by posing this question in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 3. Philosophy, for example, in the view of Aristotle, is not a single science, but a collection of related sciences including metaphysics, logic, philosophy of nature, philosophy of man, ethics (general ethics and social ethics), philosophy of art, etc.<sup>18</sup> These philosophical sciences are distinct because they have different objects, although they all have in common a method of investigation by which they look for the most fundamental causes of their respective objects, and thus are distinct species of the genus of philosophy. In the same way, empirical science is not one science, but is divided into distinct sciences: physics, chemistry, biology, etc. There is one common genus of empirical science that comes from sharing an empirical methodology, but each particular empirical science is distinct by reason of its object. Is theology likewise a collection of distinct sciences treating distinct objects—such as God, man, morality, salvation history, Sacred Scripture, the Incarnation, the Church together with her history and law, the sacraments and the liturgy—unified by a common theological method?

17 See the profound treatment of this point in Romano Guardini, “Holy Scripture and the Science of Faith,” trans. Scott G. Hefelfinger, *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010): 414–432. Originally published as “Heilige Schrift und Glaubenswissenschaft,” *Die Schildgenossen* 8 (1928): 24–57.

18 See Jacques Maritain, *Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947), 271. For the relationship between the philosophical and the empirical sciences, see *ibid.*, 111–123. Empirical sciences look for the empirical and mathematically generalizable causes of their object of study, whereas philosophical sciences look for the first and deepest causes of their object of study.

10 *De Trinitate*, 15.28.51

11 *Proslogion* 1, in *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000), 93.

12 See, for example, Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 32ff.

13 See the following section on the unity of theology.

14 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), xi.

15 The formal light of a science is the source or cause of all the knowledge of that science, that by which everything that is known in that science is grasped. The formal light of philosophy is the natural light of reason and our natural grasp of first principles. The formal light of theology is Revelation.

16 See the following section for an explanation of this term.

Indeed, the fact that theology studies God, human nature, morality, creation, salvation history, and canon law, would seem to indicate that it cannot be one science, just as no one human science studies all of those objects. In the human sciences, God is studied only by metaphysics, which is a science distinct from the philosophy of man, which is distinct from ethics, which is distinct from cosmology, which is distinct from history, which is distinct from jurisprudence.<sup>19</sup> Thus theology seems to be a collection of several distinct theological sciences, unified only by common reference to God's Revelation.

St. Thomas, on the contrary, argues that it is properly one science, whose unity comes from having one *formal object*, which is God:

I respond that sacred theology is one science. The unity of a faculty or habit should be considered according to its object, not considered in a material way, but according to the formal aspect of the object. For example, a man, an ass, and a stone all share in one formal aspect of being colored, which is the object of sight. Therefore, since sacred Scripture considers things insofar as they are divinely revealed, as has been said above, whatever has been divinely revealed shares in one formal aspect of the object of this science. And thus they are contained in sacred theology as in one science.

A brief digression may be helpful here to explain the difference between the formal and material objects of a science, faculty, or virtue. Every science has a certain unity and particular identity by which it is distinguished from other sciences. This unity comes from the focus on one general or universal object, in the light of which everything else is considered. This limitation of the focus of a particular science is called its *formal object*. Every science has its own formal object, which is that determined aspect of reality in reference to which everything else is understood within the science. For example, the formal object of ethics is morality, or the moral quality of human actions. The formal object of mathematics is quantity, or the *quantitative* aspect of reality. The formal object of physics is the motion of bodies.

In the course of its investigation, a science may happen to touch on many diverse aspects of reality that go beyond the unity of its formal object. This diversity and multiplicity of what it considers is referred to as the science's *material object*, which is broader than the formal object. This distinction between the formal and material object can be clearly seen in our sense faculties. The formal object

<sup>19</sup> St. Thomas gives two objections: Obj. 1: "It seems that sacred theology is not one science. For according to the Philosopher in book 1 of the *Posterior Analytics* [1.28], that science is one whose subject matter is one in genus. But the Creator and the creature, which are both treated in sacred theology, are not contained in one genus. Therefore sacred theology is not one science." Obj. 2: "Furthermore, sacred theology treats of angels, corporeal creatures, and human morality. But these pertain to different philosophical sciences. Therefore, sacred theology is not one science."

of sight is color, but the material object of sight includes all of sensible reality that can be known through color. Likewise, the formal object of hearing is sound, whereas its material object includes all physical reality and communication which produce sound. Among the sciences, biology provides a simple example of this distinction. The formal object of biology is living organisms. However, the material object of biology is broader, for it also includes everything that relates to living organisms, such as their environment, nourishment, chemical components, etc.

This distinction between the formal and material objects of a science also applies to Catholic theology. The formal object of theology is God insofar as He is known through Revelation and reason, but theology also considers all of creation insofar as it is created by God, governed through His providence, and called to return to Him in the sanctification of men and society. Thus the material object of theology actually includes all of reality, which no other science can claim. Nevertheless, theology has a proper unity and identity which comes from the *limitation of its formal object to one reality*: God. Everything else that is considered in theology is considered in its relation to God and His Revelation.

In this way St. Thomas answers the objection that we posed above. Although theology treats many different realities that are also studied by different human sciences, nevertheless all those realities are treated in theology under one formal aspect: in their relation to God, who is the proper subject of sacred theology. Thus in his response to the first objection, St. Thomas writes: "Sacred theology does not treat equally of God and of creatures, but principally of God, and of creatures only insofar as they are ordered to God as their source and end."

In his reply to the second objection, which argues that there should be a multiplicity of theological sciences in way similar to the multiplicity of human sciences, St. Thomas makes an interesting argument by analogy. He lays down the general principle that the higher and more noble a faculty or science, the greater is its breadth and extension: "Nothing prevents inferior faculties and habits from being diversified by those matters that fall together under a superior faculty or habit, because the superior faculty or habit views the object under a more universal formal aspect."<sup>20</sup> Our higher faculties thus have a more universal object than our lower ones. Our external senses, for example, are diversified according to different kinds of sensibles: color, sound, smell, taste, and texture. Each external sense perceives only its own proper sensible object. Our internal senses, such as imagination and memory, on the other hand, are higher and attain to the objects of all the external senses. Our one faculty of memory retains things seen, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted, and our imagination likewise represents them all. Our spiritual faculties of intel-

<sup>20</sup> *ST I*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2.

lect and will are higher still, and attain to all the objects of our external and internal senses, as well as to realities that are immaterial and not sensible at all, such as justice, virtue, and God. Intellect and will are our most noble faculties because they are potentially open to every being.

Applying this to the sciences, we see that the empirical sciences are necessarily particular in studying one type of reality alone and leaving out other aspects of being. No one empirical science, for example, can study all phenomena, but rather each science studies a particular class of sensible beings. Physics is limited to investigating the motion of inanimate bodies and cannot attain to souls and morality, etc. Mathematics has a broader scope, but is limited to quantity and quantitative relations, and thus can only describe the numerical values and relations of things. The philosophical sciences have a greater breadth, for they are not limited by empirical observation received by the five senses. The various philosophical sciences study different aspects of being and their primary causes, insofar as they can be deduced from experience and first principles. However, since the different aspects of being studied by the philosophical sciences are formally distinct, the philosophical sciences are distinct from one another. For example, logic studies reasoning, ethics studies the moral act, philosophy of nature studies the change and movement of bodies, philosophical anthropology studies human nature, and metaphysics studies being as such, and thus all of these are distinct sciences that study distinct formal objects.

Sacred theology, however, can have a greater breadth than any of the philosophical sciences, for its formal object is God, to whom all created things are ordered. St. Thomas writes:

As the object of the interior unifying sense [*sensus communis*] extends to all that is sensible, including both the visible and the audible, the unifying sense is one faculty that extends to all the different objects of the five exterior senses. Similarly, sacred theology can consider under one aspect those realities that are treated in different philosophical sciences, and still remain one. In this way sacred theology bears the stamp, in a certain way, of the divine science, which is one and simple, although extending to all things.<sup>21</sup>

By ascending higher than any human science, theology maintains its unity without sacrificing sharpness of vision. Because it reaches up to the lofty perspective of God's own revelation, taking in all things in their relation to God, it can study realities as diverse as God and man, angels and salvation history, the moral law and man's final end, without losing its unity and divine focus.

This thesis has very important pedagogical consequences for the study of theology. Since theology is one science, despite the diversity of matters treated, theologians should seek a global vision rather than overspecialize in

one area, for theological wisdom comes from knowing the whole and seeing everything in relation to the Triune God, in whose inner life man has been granted a glorious participation. The more global theological formation is, the more it is properly theological: seeing all things from the most elevated point of view possible—God's own perspective, as He has revealed it to us. Not least of the merits of St. Thomas' *Summa theologiae* is the way it manifests the unity of theology, organically ordering the manifold theological questions like a Gothic cathedral<sup>22</sup> or a living organism. Another classic work showing the unity of theology is Scheeben's *The Mysteries of Christianity*.<sup>23</sup>

Many theologians have lamented that contemporary theology has lost its unity. Avery Cardinal Dulles, at the end of his life, wrote:

Over the past fifty years we have all heard the repeated complaint, amounting sometimes to a lamentation, that theology has lost its unity. Like Humpty Dumpty it has suffered a great fall, and all the pope's theologians have not succeeded in putting it together again. Theology is splintered into subdisciplines that insist on their own autonomy without regard for one another. Biblical studies go in one direction, historical scholarship goes in another, ethics in a third, and spirituality in a fourth.

In addition to this fragmentation of disciplines, there is a growing breach between past and present. The classic statements of the faith are studied historically, in relation to the circumstances in which they arose. If their contemporary relevance is not denied, they are reinterpreted for today in ways that preserve little if anything of their original content.<sup>24</sup>

The danger of the splintering and separation of the theological disciplines is especially acute with regard to the historical-critical study of Sacred Scripture, which is often treated in practice as if it were an autonomous science distinct from systematic theology and moral theology. Benedict XVI has spoken strongly against this tendency to separate exegesis from systematic theology. In his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, he writes:

Unfortunately, a sterile separation sometimes creates a barrier between exegesis and theology, and this "occurs even at the highest academic levels." . . . In a word, "where exegesis is not theology, Scripture cannot be the soul of the theology, and conversely, where theology is not essentially the interpretation of the Church's Scripture, such a theology

22 See Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism: An Inquiry into the Analogy of the Arts, Philosophy, and Religion in the Middle Ages* (New York, New American Library, 1976).

23 Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946).

24 Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., "Wisdom as the Source of Unity for Theology," in *Wisdom and Holiness, Science and Scholarship: Essays in Honor of Matthew L. Lamb*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 59f. Quoted in Reinhard Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 314.

21 Ibid.

no longer has a foundation.”<sup>25</sup>

The splintering of theological disciplines into separate sciences would kill the splintered parts, for every branch of theology intrinsically needs the complementary insights of the other branches, analogously to a living body whose various organs form a living whole.

The glue that holds the different branches of theology together into one science is divine faith. If a part of theology, such as biblical exegesis or moral theology, were to be practiced in such a way that its methods and conclusions were considered to be neutral with regard to faith commitments, relying exclusively on the methodology of various human sciences, then those disciplines would splinter off and no longer be part of one theological science held together by faith in God’s revelation.<sup>26</sup>

### Is Sacred Theology a Practical or a Theoretical Science?

Given that theology is one science and not a collection of sciences, we may ask whether it is a theoretical or a practical science. St. Thomas addresses this in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 4. This question does not come up in the same way for philosophy, since, being a collection of philosophical sciences, it contains both kinds. Metaphysics and philosophy of nature are theoretical whereas ethics and logic are practical.

A theoretical (or speculative) science is one that is principally ordered to knowledge of truth for its own sake, whereas a practical science is one that is ordered to operation. If this operation involves the making or production of things, then the science is called an *art*; if it is directed to acting well, it is called *ethics*. Theoretical and practical sciences differ therefore in their end or purpose: to know the truth for its own sake, or to know the truth for the sake of action or operation. Examples of theoretical sciences are metaphysics, pure mathematics, and theoretical physics. Examples of practical sciences are engineering, the fine arts, medicine, psychotherapy, ethics, political science, economics, and spiritual direction. Theoretical sciences are higher than practical sciences and have a certain priority, for they provide practical sciences with their principles and ends. One must first know the truth about reality and about one’s nature and end before one can effectively determine one’s operation, for operation follows on being (*operatio sequitur esse*).

<sup>25</sup> Benedict XVI, apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* 35 (September 30, 2010). The fact that biblical exegesis is a part of sacred theology was also reaffirmed in the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (March 18, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> See Reinhard Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 313: “Renewal will have to come about by way of recovering theology’s inner unity. And the latter requires nothing less than allowing theology’s soul—supernatural, divine faith—to inform again the whole body of theology.”

Where does theology fall? It would seem to have characteristics of both types of science. On the one hand, theology is eminently practical because it is ordered to action and teaches the pathway to heaven.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Revelation is largely concerned with the moral law. On the other hand, theology is a theoretical science, for it provides knowledge of the highest truths (the Trinity, the Incarnation, etc.) for their own sake. Furthermore, its object is God, and God is not something that we produce through our operations as an artifact or moral act, but a Person whom we contemplate and adore. St. Thomas writes:

On the contrary, every practical science is concerned with things that can be made by man, as ethics is concerned with human acts, and architecture with buildings. But sacred theology is principally about God, whose work man is, and not vice versa. Therefore it is not a practical science, but rather a theoretical one.

I answer that sacred theology, while extending to things that pertain to different philosophical sciences, remains one, as was said above, on account of a common formal aspect that it considers in these different things, namely, that they are knowable by the divine light. Therefore, although philosophical sciences are divided into some that are theoretical and others that are practical, sacred theology includes both within itself, just as God both knows Himself and the things that He makes through one and the same science. However, it is more theoretical than practical, because it is more principally concerned with divine things than with human acts. The latter are treated insofar as through them man is ordered to a perfect knowledge of God in which eternal beatitude consists.<sup>28</sup>

Theology is unique in being simultaneously *theoretical and practical*. Indeed, it is both more theoretical than any other science, for it studies the First Truth in the light of His self-revelation, and more practical because it lays out the way to man’s supernatural final end. Study of the Triune God, the Incarnation, and salvation history is principally theoretical, for these truths are contemplated and loved for their own sake, now as in eternity. Nevertheless, every theological truth has immense practical implications, for the Trinity is the exemplar for the spiritual life. Prominent among the truths revealed by God is the truth about how one ought to live rightly and order human actions so as to merit heaven and glorify God, giving Him fitting worship. This is the practical aspect of theology that is studied in moral, spiritual, sacramental, and liturgical theology. Indeed, moral theology is the most practical of all sciences, for it is the most useful in teaching man how to arrive at his final end.

<sup>27</sup> See *ST I*, q. 1, a. 4, obj. 1: “It seems that sacred theology is a practical science. For the end of practical science is operation, according to the Philosopher in book 2 of the *Metaphysics*. But sacred theology is ordered to operation, according to James [1:22]: ‘Be doers of the word, and not just listeners.’”

<sup>28</sup> *ST I*, q. 1, a. 4.

Because theology is both speculative and practical, the theologian must be exemplary not only in clarity of thought, but also in the purity of his moral life. St. Thomas explains this in his commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews:

Perfection is twofold: one is perfection according to the intellect, when someone has that judgment of intellect to discern and judge rightly about those things which are proposed to him; the other is perfection according to the affection that charity makes, which is when someone adheres totally to God. . . . For the doctrine of Sacred Scripture has this, that in it are not things only to be pondered, as in geometry, but also to be approved through the affection. Hence Mt 5:19: “But he that shall do and teach,” etc. Therefore, in other sciences it suffices that a man be perfect according to his understanding, but in these it is required that he be perfect according to understanding and affection.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ch. 5, lectio 2, trans. Chrysostom Baer (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2006), no. 273, p. 120.