Chapter 1. Is the discipline of theology an [exact] science?

Therefore, one must first inquire whether the discipline of theology is an [exact] science. This is the way the argument will proceed:

[Objections]

1. Augustine, 83 Questions, q. 48: “Some things are taken on faith and are never a matter of understanding, for example, every history that deals with singular events and human deeds.” Therefore, since the discipline of theology is for the most part historical, as is clear from the Law and the Gospel, it is about the things that are “never a matter of understanding.” But there cannot be a science about things that are not a matter of understanding, for science deals with intelligible things; it remains, therefore, that the discipline of theology is not a science.

2. Also, as Aristotle says at the beginning of his Metaphysics, “Experience is of singular individual things, while art deals with universals: for art comes into existence when, after having had multiple experiences of similar things, one starts to group them under one and the same class”; but the discipline of theology for the most part does not deal with universals, but with singular and individual things, as is clear from historical narratives in it. Therefore it is not an art or science.

3. Also, truth is received in three ways in disciplines: by way of opinion, belief, or science; opinion is formed out of things subject to opinion; belief is formed out of credible things; science is formed out of intelligible things. However, science never derives from things pertaining to opinion or belief as such. Now since theology as such deals with matters of belief, according to John 20:31, But these are written that you might believe, therefore it does not operate as a science.

4. Also, Augustine, On the Trinity, Bk. 14: “I do not attribute to ‘science’ whatever humans are capable of knowing as regards human affairs, where there is much empty vanity and harmful curiosity, but only that by which most salutary faith, which leads one to true blessedness, is born, nourished, and strengthened.” Therefore, all that this “science” generates is faith; therefore, it is not science in the true sense of the word, especially since faith is a way of grasping that is “situated above opinion but below science.”
[To the contrary]

a. That which is known through divine inspiration is known more truly than that which is known through human reasoning, because divine inspiration allows for no falsity, while the latter occurs frequently in reasoning. Therefore, since knowledge in theology is divinely inspired (2 Timothy 3:16: All scripture is given by inspiration of God; and 2 Peter, 1:21: The holy men of God spoke as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit), it is a truer science than other sciences.

b. Also, Augustine says in Bk. 14 of On the Trinity: “theology is a science dealing with things that pertain to our salvation.” Therefore it is a science.

[Solution]

First of all one must note that there could be a science of the cause and a science of the caused. Now the science of the cause of [all] causes is certainly self-sufficient. At the same time, a science of the caused, be they [lower] causes or merely effects, is not self-sufficient, because those things relate to, and depend on, the cause of [all] causes. Hence we conclude that theology, which is a science about God, who is the cause of all causes, is self-sufficient. But the name of ‘science’ [technically speaking] is applied to the sciences of the caused, while the science of the cause of all causes is [actually] called ‘wisdom.’ For this reason even Aristotle says that First Philosophy, which is self-sufficient and deals with the cause of all causes, should be called ‘wisdom.’ By the same token, the discipline of theology, which surpasses all other sciences, must be called ‘wisdom.’ Hence Deuteronomy 4:6: This is our wisdom and understanding in the sight of the nations.

In addition, it must be noted that there is [the sort of] science that perfects our cognition by way of truth, and also there is [the sort of] science that moves our affection toward goodness. The first kind is like cognition through [the faculty of] sight, and therefore should be called science in an absolute sense. The second kind is like cognition by way of taste, and for this reason should be called wisdom,² from the taste of affection, according to what is said in Ecclesiasticus 6:22: Wisdom is like her name.

Therefore, theology, which perfects the soul by way of affection, moving it toward the good through the principles of fear and love, is more appropriately and mainly wisdom. First Philosophy, which is the philosophers’ theology³ and deals with the cause of all causes, but perfects our cognition by way of skill and reasoning, is less appropriately called wisdom. As for the rest of the sciences, which are about subsequent [levels of] causes and about the effects, they should not be called ‘wisdoms’ but sciences [strictly speaking].

For these reasons one must say that the discipline of theology is wisdom in its proper sense as wisdom. As for First Philosophy, which is the knowledge of first causes, which are goodness, wisdom, and power, it is wisdom in the sense of science. As for other sciences, which study accidents of a subject through their respective causes, they are sciences in the sense of science.

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² A pun lost in the English: ‘wisdom’ (sapientia) has the same root in Latin as ‘flavor’ (sapor).
³ I.e., part of philosophy that deals with transcendence, or the divine.
Reply to the objections:

1. To the first it must be said that history functions differently in sacred scripture compared to other disciplines. Indeed, in other disciplines the meaning of historical narratives is to relay “singular and individual deeds” of the people, nor is any inner meaning intended. For this reason, because these historical narratives are about individual and temporal acts, they do indeed deal with those things that are “never a matter of understanding.” However, in sacred scripture historical narratives are not intended to signify individual acts of humans, but they are supposed to signify universal principles of action and conditions that pertain to instructing the audience and informing the contemplation of the divine mysteries. For example, Abel’s suffering is introduced to signify the passion of Christ and the just, Cain’s malice in order to signify the perversity of the unjust, and so forth. Thus in [the sort of] history that is found in sacred scripture an individual fact is introduced in order to signify a universal [principle,] and this is where one can speak of understanding and science [in it].

2. To the second it must said that ‘universal’ can be used in four senses: in predication (an example: ‘man’); in exemplifying (an example: the shape of an [individual] shoe standing for a number of shoes, or the life of Job standing for the lives of a number of people); in signifying (an example: Jacob signifying a just man who was associated with both Rachel and Lia, for he exerted himself in both contemplative and active life); in reference to causality (an example: God as the universal cause of the creation of things, or Christ as the universal cause of the restoration of humans). Now in view of this one must say that sacred scripture does contain universals. For sacred scripture does have general pronouncements, such as Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7); The end of the commandment is charity (1 Timothy 1:5), and the like. In such universal pronouncements we have ‘universal’ understood in the first sense, that of predication. It also has particular or individual pronouncements, which appear in historical, prophetic, and other contexts. In these, if one takes their surface meaning, one can find ‘universal’ in the second sense, i.e., in the sense of exemplifying [something]. For example, literally the stories of Abraham and Job are about individual events, but they are told in scripture to provide an example of good conduct. On this account Romans 15:4: Whatsoever things were written, were written for our learning; and James 5:10: Take the prophets for an example of patience and suffering affliction. As for the inner and spiritual meaning, pronouncements about individual things contain ‘universal’ in the third sense, i.e., universals of signification, for from one universal principle they point to many [individual] things. If one takes both senses of the scripture, inner and outer, expressed either in general or in individual pronouncements, insofar as they provide some way to God, who is the universal cause of the creation of things, or to Christ, who is the universal cause of the restoration of humans—it contains ‘universal’ in the fourth sense, i.e., in the sense of causation. Therefore, having made these distinctions, in this sense one can say that sacred doctrine [i.e., theology] is about universal principles.

3. To the third it must be said that, according to Augustine’s distinction in 83 Questions [q. 48], “there are three kinds of things pertaining to belief. Some are those that are always taken on faith and are never a matter of understanding, as any historical narrative. Others are believed in the course of understanding them, as all rational arguments, either about numbers or about some disciplines. Others are first believed and then understood;
such are things pertaining to the divine that can only be understood by those of pure heart, which is attained if one sticks to the precepts designed to promote good life.” From this it appears that there is a category of “things pertaining to belief” that is never associated with science, such as historical [narratives of] deeds. Then there are some [such things] that do go together with science, for example, credibility of arguments of [scholarly] disciplines. Finally, there are some that dispose one toward understanding and science, as is the case with matters pertaining to the divine. Whence, according to an alternative reading of Isaiah 7:9, Unless you believe, you will not understand. Therefore, it is not mutually repugnant for theology to be both about matters of belief and a science at the same time.

4. The reply to the fourth is already clear, because this science first generates belief or faith, and later, after the heart has been cleansed by faith that operates through love, it generates the understanding. Hence this is the difference between this discipline, which is wisdom, from others, which are sciences: in this discipline, ‘belief’ leads to ‘understanding,’ while in those other disciplines ‘understanding’ leads to ‘belief’—for one assents [to something] by the very fact of understanding [it].

As for what is added, namely that “belief is below science and above opinion,” one must make a distinction: there is belief that derives from probable reasons, and of such belief it is true that it is below science; there is also belief or faith that is inspired to assent to primary truth for its own sake, and this type is above any science. It is precisely to this sort of belief that the grasp of the sacred teaching disposes one, and it is at this sort of belief that it is aimed.

Also, one could object as follows: “every [singular] science is of some [single] kind of subject, whose parts and accidents it considers of themselves,” as the Philosopher says [in Posterior Analytics I, c. 28]; however, Boethius says in his book On the Trinity that “God is not a subject”; therefore one cannot examine God in the same way one examines an accident of a subject; therefore, theology, which is knowledge about God, will not be a science.

To this, one must say that the way of “knowing forms that are embedded in matter is different from the way of knowing forms that are separate from matter,” as Boethius shows in his book On the Trinity. In the first case, form inheres in its subject by means of some cause. In such cases “[singular] science” is indeed understood to be “of a [singular] kind of subject” and it “considers accidents of the subject.” However, the way of knowing forms and things that are separate from matter, such as the divinity and trinity of persons, is different. In such cases, through operation we become aware of the power, and through the power, of the very substance of divinity, as in Romans 1:20: The invisible things of God... are seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead.

In addition to that, the way of knowing simple things is different from the way of knowing composites. Indeed, composites are known by way of resolving them into their parts, and therefore a “[singular] science,” which is of composites, indeed, “is of a single kind of subject, whose parts it considers.” However, one cannot assume this way of knowing as regards simple things, which do not admit of parts—for divinity, as a simple thing, cannot be known by this way of knowing, but by the one described above.

4 I.e., according to the ‘Itala’ version, which was, unlike the Vulgate, a Latin translation from the Septuagint.
Chapter 4. On the ways of proceeding in [the science of] sacred scripture.

Next, the question is about the ways of proceeding in sacred scripture. The first question is whether the way of [proceeding in] sacred scripture is that of discipline\(^5\) or science. The second is whether it is one of certitude. The third is whether it is uniform or has many forms. And assuming it has many forms, the fourth question is about the multitude of ways [of proceeding] in sacred scripture.

Article 1. Is the way of [proceeding in] sacred scripture that of discipline or science?

Objections to the first Article:

1. Any poetic manner is non-scientific and alien to any discipline, because this manner is historical and metaphorical, neither of which is characteristic of a [scientific] discipline. But the theological manner is poetic, historical, or parabolic;\(^6\) therefore it is not scientific.
2. Also, every scientific manner proceeds by way of defining, taking things apart [conceptual analysis], and putting them back together [conceptual synthesis]. However, the way of sacred scripture is not like this; therefore it is not scientific.
3. Also, every scientific manner uses a manifest or direct way of speaking. At the same time, the manner of sacred scripture uses mystical speech; therefore it is not scientific.

[Reply]

It must be said that the way of sacred scripture is not that of science in the sense in which human reason understands it. It operates by organizing divine wisdom in order to instruct the soul in those matters that pertain to salvation. Therefore Augustine says in On the Trinity, Bk. 14: “I do not attribute to this science whatever humans are capable of knowing as regards human affairs, where there is much vanity or harmful curiosity, but only that by which most salutary faith, which leads one to true blessedness, is born, nourished, and strengthened.” And this sort of science deals with things that pertain to one’s salvation.

[Answer to objections]

2. To the second one must reply that there are different [scientific] styles: one operates by way of grasping truth through human reason; the other operates by way of [eliciting] the affection of piety through what is divinely inspired.

\(^5\) Although Alexander uses the Latin terms ars and artificialis, it is clear form the context that he is not speaking of “art” in a modern sense but simply of some “professional skill” such as found in a strict disciplinary approach.

\(^6\) I.e., uses parable, which is a kind of metaphor.
Now it is the first manner that should operate through defining, taking things apart [analysis], and putting them back together [synthesis]. And this manner is appropriate for human sciences, because it is precisely the grasping of truth by the human reason that is reflected in dividing [concepts,] definitions, and rational arguments.

The second manner must operate by way of precepts, examples, admonitions, revelations, and prayer, because it is these things that are appropriate for [eliciting] the affection of piety. And it is this manner that is characteristic of sacred scripture. Hence Titus 1:1 refers to [scripture as] knowledge or science according to piety. Besides, the manner that operates by way of precepts is present in the Law and in the Gospel; the one that operates by way of examples is present in history texts; the one that operates by way of admonitions is present in the books of Solomon and in the Epistles; the one that operates by way of revelations is present in the Prophets; and the one that operates by way of prayer is present in the Psalter.

Also note that the manners of two types of sciences—one that is after shaping our affection along the lines of piety, and the other that is after shaping the intellect alone for the cognition of truth—are different. And the one that is after shaping our affection proceeds in ways that have just been described, because precepts, examples, admonitions, revelations, and prayers incite affections of piety. For piety is “worship of God,” as Augustine says in On the Trinity, Bk. 12, introducing the alternative version of Job 28:28: Behold, piety is wisdom. For it is a worship of God “through which we presently desire to see him and believe and hope to see him in the future”: we desire by charity, we believe by faith, and we hope by hope, and the discipline of piety is formed according to these three virtues.

Article 2. Is the manner of sacred scripture one of certitude?

Next, it is asked: Is the manner of sacred scripture one of certitude, namely, is the approach of sacred scripture more certain than in other sciences?

[Reply]

There is a certitude of speculation and that of experience. In addition to those, there is a certitude of intellect and a certitude of affection. Also, there is a certitude as far as the spiritual [part of the] soul is concerned and a certitude as far as the animal [part of the] soul is concerned. I say, then, that the theological approach is more certain by the certitude of experience, by the certitude of affection, which is by way of taste (as in Psalms [118:103]: How sweet are your words to my taste!), but not more certain as far as intellectual speculation goes, which operates by way of seeing. Also, it is more certain to a spiritual man but less certain to an animal man, as in 1 Corinthians 2:14: But the animal man does not perceive the things of the Spirit of God..., but the spiritual man discerns all.

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7 I.e., the one based on the text of the Itala, which is based on the Septuagint.
[Reply to the objections]

1. A reply to the first objection is clear now: i.e., faith is more certain than the intellect in other sciences by the certitude of affection, not by the certitude of speculation.
2. To the second one must say that there are principles of truth as truth, and there are principles of truth as goodness. Now other sciences proceed from the principles of truth as truth, which are self-evident. Theology, however, proceeds from the principles of truth as goodness, which are self-evident insofar as goodness is concerned, but concealed and hidden insofar as truth is concerned. Hence this discipline is based on virtue rather than on science, and it is wisdom rather than science, for it consists in virtue and practical efficiency rather than in contemplation and [speculative] knowledge, as in 1 Corinthians 2:4: *And my speech is not in enticing words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*
3. To the third one must say that there is a [kind of] certitude [that is sufficient] for an animal man, who only has knowledge from sense experience, and there is a [kind of] certitude [that is sufficient] for a spiritual man, who has the spiritual capacity to contemplate the divine. Now for an animal man an approach through mystical pronouncements does not possess certitude, although it does for a spiritual man, as in 1 Corinthians, 2:9-10: *what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, what has not entered into the heart of man... [God] has revealed to us by his Spirit: for the spirit searches all things.*

Besides, as has been said, it is characteristic of this science to proceed by way of mystery, and therefore by using obscure speech; therefore, because the way of obscure and mystical speech is characteristic of this science, this way will be more certain for a soul that is disposed to receive this science, namely, to a spiritual, not an animal soul.
4. To the final point, one must say that the standards of ‘certitude’ in the sciences of the human and divine spirit are different. The first kind is constricted by the limits of a single human intellect, which can only understand one thing at a time. The second kind, however, knows no such restriction, for the divine Spirit, who is responsible for this science, is *one but multiple* (Wisdom 7:22). Hence the approach in sacred doctrine: there is one literal meaning, but multiple hidden meanings. And this does not diminish certitude for the soul that is disposed to receive this [kind of certitude,] i.e., the spiritual soul, as was said.

<...>

II. Next, it is asked about the literal sense: is it founded upon truth?

1. For sometimes it seems that it is founded on lies: Judges 9:8, *The trees went forth to anoint a king over them;* but this does not seem to belong to the knowledge of truth: Job 13:7, ‘God does not need our lies.’

[Reply]

I reply that there are two types of truth in speech: either that which is told can be true, or that for the sake of which it is told can be true. Therefore, one must say that parables of this sort are true as far as that for the sake of which they are told is true, for their aim is to
designate some event or thing in a truthful manner. In this way, one pays attention not to what their primary meaning is, but what their secondary meaning is. For this reason one must note that historical accounts are true in terms of what the words mean, and parabolic statements are true in terms of the things that are signified [secondarily through primary meanings].