# John of St. Thomas (Poinsot) on the Science of Sacred Theology

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First published in 2024

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11164730

***Studia Poinsotiana***

https://www.uc.pt/fluc/ief/publica/poinsotiana

IEF — Institute for Philosophical Studies

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Coimbra

The Institute for Philosophical Studies is sponsored by Portuguese funds via the FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., under the UID/FIL/00010/2020 project.

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# I Introduction

On 17 June 1644 John of St. Thomas (Poinsot), ill with a fever and utterly exhausted by many labors, knew that his death was imminent. After fortifying himself with the sacraments, he shouted out—at least the Solesmes editors of Poinsot's *Cursus theologicus* tell us—that "at no time in the space of thirty years have I written or taught what could not be judged to be consonant with the truth or in conformity to the Angelic Doctor".[1] To his mind, this was true both with respect to his philosophical as well as his theological output. In fact, Poinsot had managed to accomplish what Thomas had not, namely, the composition of what José Pereira calls a "super-system", that is, a completely worked out philosophical course of studies merged with an equally comprehensive theological synthesis.[2] The *Cursus philosophicus* together with the *Cursus theologicus* form an architectonic structure that virtually encompasses the entirety of human knowledge.[3] They do so, moreover, with careful attention to the satisfaction of what constitutes an Aristotelian science. Sacred theology, for Thomas, no less than metaphysics or physics, was a veritable science. Poinsot saw it as his commentarial task to explain how theology constitutes a true science. This task, moreover, was to be undertaken in conformity with the principles and theses that the Angelic Doctor had established in his own work.

The full reception of the *corpus Aristotelicum* in the Latin West that occurred in the thirteenth century was a watershed moment. A new and comprehensive—but competing—worldview landed in the midst of Christian thinkers who were compelled to offer a response to the challenge that the Aristotelian perspective provided. Some, such as Bonaventure, while not entirely repudiating Aristotelian philosophy *tout court*, confronted it with blistering critique and managed to preserve the broadly Neoplatonic Augustinianism that had dominated much of Christendom's previous theological outlook. Others, such as Siger du Brabant together with the so-called Latin Averroists, were content to adopt various Aristotelian theses even if they conflicted with Christian (theological) belief. Philosophical (Aristotelian) truth could be maintained alongside theological truth in a fashion that was regarded as a "double truth theory".[4] Still, others sought the integration of Aristotelian thought with their fundamental, Christian creedal commit-



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ments. This integration was not meant to be a compromise, as if certain revelatory truths had to be reworked or abandoned if no philosophical justification could be provided. Rather, what was at issue was the integration of Aristotelian philosophy into the structure of Christian belief for the purposes of illuminating further the intelligibility of those very beliefs. Constructing such a rapprochement would be the task of thinkers such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.

In his *Posterior Analytics* Aristotle identified the basic structure of science (ἐπιστήμη) as a demonstrative form of cognition that arrives at the ultimate causes of things through discourse and determines what attributes or properties necessarily follow from some subject.[5] This was true for all sciences and, to Aristotle's mind, ultimately culminated in first philosophy, wisdom, or theology[6]—in essence, what Christian thinkers simply called 'metaphysics'.[7] The question for Christian thinkers such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas was whether that same scientific methodology could be made to accommodate *sacra doctrina*, thereby constituting it as demonstrative.[8] They, and the many who would follow after term such as Poinsot, were convinced that such a feat could be accomplished. Famously, Thomas organized *sacra doctrina* according to the rubrics of an Aristotelian science in his *Summa theologiae*. Interrupted by a mystical experience or at the very least by his death, this work was left unfinished and ended in the *tertia pars*'s treatise on penance. Nevertheless, the *Summa theologiae* was meant to be a systematic presentation of theological science developed, not in a haphazard way as had the previous *Sententiae* of Peter the Lombard, but according to the rationale and *ordo doctrinae* that the subject itself demanded. This can be seen from the opening question wherein Thomas argues that "some other doctrine" (*alia doctrina*) besides philosophy is necessary for human salvation.[9] As Poinsot points out, for Thomas just as much as for Aristotle, 'doctrine' (*doctrina*) and also 'discipline' (*disciplina*) are just "the probative cognition of something whether scientifically or probabilistically".[10] The task for Thomas was to show that *sacra doctrina* constituted a 'scientific' or demonstrative cognition and then construct a scientific doctrine of theology.

As Poinsot saw it, it fell to him to pick up where his master left off, develop the implications entailed in Thomas's theoretical commitments vis-



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à-vis the scientific character of theology, and respond to points of controversy that developed among late scholastic thinkers who flourished after Thomas's death. The first disputation of Poinsot's *Cursus theologicus* was devoted to establishing the certitude of the principles of theology against pagans, Jews, and heretics. But the argument defending the claim that theology is a true science is to be found in the second disputation. Readers of Thomas's *Summa theologiae* will note that Poinsot's twelve-article treatment surpasses Thomas's, which devotes only ten articles to the discussion of sacred science. John P. Doyle suggests that the reason for the two added articles stems from Poinsot's engagement with other Thomist and non-Thomistic theologians who either developed or challenged Thomas's own thinking regarding the scientific character of theology.[11] It is clear that Poinsot does not merely follow Thomas's own presentation on the matter–though the Angelic Doctor serves as a constant point of reference—but develops his argument considerably beyond Thomas's text in order to address concerns and answer questions that arose from the *Summa* and were more proximate to his own time.

## II Subalternation and Theology

Like natural theology, otherwise known as metaphysics,[12] 'Christian theology' (*theologia christiana*) consists in a discursive knowledge about God; unlike natural theology, Christian theology does not take its point of departure from creation through which it arrives demonstratively at God. Rather, Christian theology takes as its starting point God Himself and the divine truths that God reveals. But "since we cannot know of God as He is in Himself, except through divine revelation and not from creatures" Christian theology relies on faith or one's belief in what God has disclosed through revelation.[13] Poinsot goes on to say that revelation itself is twofold: there is first the revelation that is enjoyed as a clear vision *in patria* (i.e., the beatific vision) and there is the revelation which is only obscure that can be had in our earthly life *in via*, which is what requires faith. There is a distinction to be marked, then, between 'faith' and 'Christian theology': "what faith pertains to immediately is revelation, but what theology infers from that is called mediate or virtual revelation".[14] That is to say, in addition to what



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can be known on account of revelation, one can further attain demonstrative knowledge of what must follow from that revelatory data; such demonstrative knowledge counts, for Poinsot, as a form of mediate or virtual revelation.

In the third article of his second disputation, Poinsot addresses whether the theology we have in this life (*theologia nostra viatorum*) as well as the knowledge that the blessed (i.e., those creatures enjoying the beatific vision) have *in patria* properly rank as sciences, again, in the Aristotelian sense outlined in the *Posterior Analytics*. Some Jesuit theologians, such as Gregory of Valencia, Gabriel Vazquez, and Pedro Arrubal, deny that "our" theology is scientific. Vazquez also rejects the claim that the knowledge the blessed have is scientific since there is no discursive reasoning involved in the beatific vision.[15] Poinsot rejects the claims of those who deny the scientific character of theology and sides with Thomists such as Cajetan, Domingo Báñez, Francisco Zumel, and Melchor Cano, who argue that our (theological) knowledge as well as that of the blessed is truly scientific.

With respect to the knowledge of God that the blessed have, Poinsot is convinced of its scientific character since that knowledge is neither opinion, uncertainty, nor knowledge of principles. Rather, it is knowledge *inferred* from principles, which is precisely why it is scientific, "for nothing more is required for a science, than that it is certain knowledge and evident through inference [*per illationem*]".[16] To explain his thinking, Poinsot compares the saint *in patria* with his earthly self regarding the knowledge of God. In both states, one and the same person reasons from principles to conclusions regarding God. The difference is that the saint in his earthly life knows those principles through faith, whereas *in patria* those principles "are seen clearly through glory" (*videntur clare per visionem gloriae*).[17] Despite arguing that there is in fact a discursive reasoning process among the blessed—as is manifest by their speaking to and illuminating others, which can only be done through a discursive process—such reasoning on the part of the knowing subject is not strictly or formally required for a science. Rather, "an eminential [structure] suffices, and on the part of the object: just as there is preserved [*salvatur*] in the angels, and indeed in God Himself, a true and proper science without imperfection or metaphor".[18] Thus Poinsot holds that science can be maintained in the blessed despite the fact that there is no formal discur-



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sive reasoning.[19] He maintains his thesis coherently, I suggest, because, like Thomas, Poinsot accepts that 'science' is analogical among God, angels, and human beings.[20]

What then specifically does it mean to say that theology is 'scientific' for us, that is, for *homo viator*? The scientific character of theology is, for Poinsot as it was for Thomas, qualified (*secundum quid)* inasmuch as it is a subalternate to a higher science whose principles, while certain in themselves, are not evident to us.[21] As an example of a subalternate science, Poinsot points to optics, which proceeds from principles known by a higher science, namely, arithmetic.[22] While it might be the case that a subalternate science does not resolve its principles into that which is evident (to us), its conclusions are nevertheless certain. Furthermore, it is certainty and not evidentiality that Aristotle thinks is constitutive of a science. The reason for this is that there is an intellectual habit that, even when evidence is absent, is based upon an infallible connection in relation to an infallible truth. This habit, moreover, cannot be identified with art or prudence since one can find good theologians who lack both art and prudence. Nor can that habit be one of first principles (i.e., νοῦς or *intellectus*); rather, it pertains to reasoning well. For Poinsot, this habit can only be what the Greeks call 'science' (ἐπιστήμη).[23]

Furthermore, the scientific character of the knowledge that we have of God is clear from the manner in which theology pursues evidence. While all sciences seek evidence, it is not always the case that evidence is in fact attained.[24] We might appreciate why this is the case if we understand that there are two kinds of evidence: (1) there is that evidence which is "immediately resolved into its principles" (*resolutam immediate in sua principia*); (2) and there is that evidence which is "presupposed and made by a superior science" (*praesuppositam factamque a superiori scientia*).[25] By this distinction I take Poinsot to mean that something is evident because of the principles that pertain to one and the same science. Thus, for example, the conclusions of geometry are known by the principles or starting points of geometry itself and are epistemically accessible to the geometer. Those principles serve as the evidence for the conclusions reached in geometry. In contrast, with respect to the lower science of optics, the principles it takes as its point of



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departure derive not from optics itself, but from the higher science to which optics is subalternate, namely, geometry. Thus any certainty that can be had in optics will ultimately be reduced to the certainty of the evidence that pertains to the higher science: geometry.

As Poinsot sees it, on the side of the one pursuing optics (i.e., the knowing subject) there may not be the perfect character of scientific knowledge since he does not know the principles of geometry, the subalternating science. Nevertheless, the subalternate science of optics truly possesses the formal character (*ratio formalis*) of a 'science' since its principles are resolved into the principles of the subalternating science—geometry—which provides evidence.[26] For this reason, Thomas concedes that a subalternate science is not *perfectly* a science,[27] but, as Poinsot observes, it does not, for that matter, fail to be *properly* a science.[28] Indeed, "a subalternate science of its nature only seeks evidence presupposed and produced by another science, but not [evidence] produced through itself".[29] Thus, the science of optics can truly be found in a knowing subject who might happen to lack the science of geometry. If it were the case, however, that the "light of principles" (*lumen principiorum*) is removed from the non-subalternate science such that that science would be unable to resolve itself into its principles, all evidence for that science would be lost. Its own evidence cannot be presupposed.[30]

Poinsot entertains a number of objections to the claim that sacred theology rightly counts as a science. One particularly noteworthy objection points out that it is the nature of an Aristotelian science to treat that which is universal and necessary. Sacred theology, however, clearly involves matters that are only particular and contingent such as 'calling' (*vocatio*) and 'justification' (*iustificatio*).[31] Poinsot's response is ingenious. It is not the case that sacred theology treats particular or singular things precisely insofar as they are singular. Rather, it treats singular things in terms of their excellence, which consists in an absolute uniqueness, such as is the case with the Incarnation of Christ and the dignity of the Virgin Mary. There is precedent for the recognition of uniqueness in science as can be seen from astronomy and natural philosophy, both of which treat the sun and planets, which are themselves singular things.[32] Furthermore, in the consideration of something so unique as the Hypostatic union, for example, what is examined are the



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essential and necessary structures of such a reality and what follows from such a union, even though it happens that such a union occurs singularly in Christ. With respect to 'justification' and 'calling', again, they are treated not in terms of their singularity, but in terms of their essential natures or *quidditas*. Besides, with respect to sacred theology, the science proceeds from divine revelation and thus singular things are "infallibly known" (*infallibiter sunt nota*) precisely in their relationship to divine knowledge.[33]

# III Theology and Dogmatic Declarations

For Poinsot, given his Catholic commitments, the revelatory content of the faith is mediated by the teaching authority of the Church. While Christ's status as the Son of the Father and his resurrection from the dead are clearly proposed for belief through sacred scripture, there remain certain truths that are further proposed for belief by the Church, for example, the Immaculate conception. The relationship between the teaching authority of the Church and what is attained as a (theological) conclusion through a discursive reasoning process requires some explanation.

Poinsot has already established that the articles of the faith serve as the first principles from which the theologian reasons to some conclusion. That is to say, in a syllogism which requires two premises that a (theological) conclusion may be reached, at least one of those premises must be an article of faith.[34] For Poinsot, the certitude of a theological conclusion derives from its sound reasoning from the antecedent principles of faith that serve as the syllogism's premises. The conclusion is not itself a matter of faith but—because it has been reasoned to—remains truly scientific,[35] "since every certitude which is had by inference and discourse [*per consequentiam et discursum*] is not immediately an assent of faith".[36] It would seem, then, that the difference between faith and theology consists in the fact that the former involves no (human) discursive reasoning at all "but by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and not only because it seems so to us, but because 'it seems so to the Holy Spirit'".[37] In contrast, theology, taking the articles of faith as its principles, reasons therefrom to arrive at its conclusions, which are not immediately matters of faith. Poinsot is clear: "therefore theology



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will thereupon be a science, when from the principles of faith it proceeds by means of an evident inference".[38]

The situation is otherwise when the Church intervenes with a dogmatic declaration. There may be discourse and reasoning pertaining to a certain dogmatic pronouncement—again, theologians arriving at the notion of the Immaculate conception is a case in point—but, ultimately, when the Church makes a theological definition, it is "from a special assistance of the Holy Spirit" (*ex speciali assistentia Spiritus Sancti*).[39] Accordingly, such a definition is not proposed only because it is "deduced by the natural light [of reason]" (*lumen naturali deducitur*).[40] Rather, the truths defined by the Church have the nature of belonging to the faith and can themselves serve as principles of theology.[41] As Poinsot explains, "since a truth defined by the Church as a matter of faith [*de fide*] is proposed to all for belief, such that he who would deny it would be directly and formally a heretic; therefore such a truth is immediately a matter of faith and not a theological conclusion".[42]

# IV The Mixed Principles of Theology

Addressing the role of the magisterial office of the Church vis-à-vis the relationship between faith and (scientific) theology is one thing; in the opposite direction, however, is the role that human reason itself plays in providing (natural) principles for theology's demonstrations. As Poinsot acknowledges, the vast majority of theological demonstrations are inferred from one premise of faith and another premise "known by a natural light" (*lumine naturali nota*). As an example we might consider the following: "Every human being is risible; Christ is a human being; therefore Christ is risible".[43] The fact that theology makes use of natural principles together with the notion of 'virtual revelation' (I shall discuss this topic below) constitutes, according to Yves Congar, Poinsot's "definitive determination of the Scholastic notion of theology".[44] Theology's use of natural principles raises, to Poinsot's mind, two questions: first, what is the relationship between the inferred theological conclusion and the natural premise: and, second, insofar as the natural premise is known by a natural light, does that make theology subalternated to natural science? Needless to say, the answer to these two questions turns



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upon the nature of the so-called 'natural premise' and its function in theological science. To shed light on this, Poinsot, following Thomas,[45] holds that theology does not make use of natural sciences as though they were superior sciences to theology. Rather, theology makes use of lower sciences as 'handmaids' (*ancillae*), which Poinsot explains in terms of their functioning 'ministerially and dispositively' (*ministerialiter et dispositive*) vis-à-vis the higher science: theology.[46] Admittedly, the meaning behind describing natural premises as ancillary or even as functioning ministerially is not entirely transparent and thus requires some further explanation from Poinsot.

The Dominican thinker points out that the reason for theology's use of natural premises stems not from any defect of the part of the sacred science but from the weakness of our own human intellects, which require the use of lower sciences so that the intelligibility of the superior science may be made more evident to us. This ancillary relationship between the lower science (metaphysics) and the higher science (theology) emerges from the sapiential character of theology itself. The wiseman (*sapiens*), according to Thomas, is the one who orders all things to their end, and, absolutely speaking, the wiseman is the theologian who understands how all things are ordered to God.[47] In its sapiential task, "wisdom not only uses indemonstrable principles, whether [those] proper to it or [those] from another [science], deducing conclusions from them, but also in judging and disputing against those who would deny them".[48] Moreover, Poinsot thinks that, when theology utilizes the principles of lower sciences, it does so without subalternating itself to them; it remains a superior science. How this is so he explains from a general and more specific perspective.

Generally, the certitude that a theological conclusion involves does not stem from the principle taken from a lower science. Rather, the principle of a lower science is elevated and made more certain by its utilization within the higher theological science. As Poinsot explains, "in inferring its conclusions wisdom thus utilizes the principles of inferior [sciences], but, however, formally and always reducing them to the superior nature [*ratio*] of wisdom, by which the lower principles are perfected, that is, judged and approved and defended".[49] Since wisdom is just theology, theology's conclusions do not depend upon natural premises insofar as they are natural or lower, but



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makes use of them only 'materially' (*materialiter*).[50] The only example of such an 'elevation' of a lower principle that Poinsot supplies is that from Thomas Aquinas himself, who says that 'civil science' utilizes 'military science'. We might consider another example: namely, that of the Catholic notion of sacramentality. In the sacraments, natural substances (e.g., water, oil, wine, bread, etc.) are utilized to confer grace upon their recipients. In baptism, water is used sacramentally to remove the stain of original sin and to confer an indelible mark upon one's soul. Those effects, however, go well beyond the (natural) capacities of water as a natural substance. In a similar way, we might say that the principles of natural sciences can be elevated within their theological use to reach a conclusion that exceeds their merely natural capacity. This leads to Poinsot's specific consideration.

The conclusion reached in a theological argument often flows not only from a natural principle, but also from a principle of faith. Consequently, the theological conclusion is of a higher order than what would only be attained by an inference from natural principles. Indeed the natural principle does not operate alone but with dependence upon a supernatural principle. It is not the main reason, then, for one's assent to the theological conclusion.[51] Rather, the natural principle serves, as already noted, "ministerially" to accommodate the weakness of our intellects and is more connatural to our way of understanding.[52] For Poinsot, then, theology is not subordinate to a natural principle but, as already stated, that principle is elevated and perfected, for "in whatever way it is posited, it is not subordinated to that natural premise, since it does not pertain to it as perfective of itself inasmuch as it is a natural principle, but rather as [the natural principle] is perfected and elevated by itself".[53] Accordingly, theology, even though it utilizes principles from a lower science, is not thereby subordinate or subalternate to that lower science.

## V Virtual Revelation: The Unity of Theology

Given Poinsot's claim that theology can proceed either according to mixed principles (i.e., one supernatural, the other natural) or from principles only from faith, the question arises whether two species of theology thereby result.



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This is a question that pertains to the specific unity of theology. Further, if it is the case that theology is truly or specifically one, then the question is: what is the "formal character under which" (*ratio formalis sub qua*) theology is unified?

In answer to the first question, Poinsot argues that theology is 'one' whether it proceeds from mixed principles or from principles taken entirely from the articles of faith. In order to defend his thesis, Poinsot introduces the notion of 'virtual revelation', which is that *formal ratio* from which all theological truths proceed. This is true for those conclusions derived from two articles of faith as well as those which derive from mixed principles. His point is that, even in the case wherein both premises of theology are taken from articles of faith, what is inferred from them scientifically is not itself something immediately known by faith: "since such a conclusion is not immediately believed just as from faith, but is known discursively as inferred; therefore it does not pertain to what is immediately revealed, but what is deduced from revelation, which is virtual revelation".[54] The same holds for those conclusions drawn from mixed principles. A conclusion that is drawn from a natural principle as well as from an article of faith is not thereby "removed" (*extrahitur*) from the formal character (*a ratione formale*) of what has been virtually revealed.[55]

The reason why the conclusion is not removed from virtual revelation is because, as already stated, the natural premise is itself elevated by the principle of faith so as to serve the supernatural premise ministerially. Thus the natural premise is elevated and conjoined to the article of faith in a ministerial way to reach the theological conclusion. For this reason, as Congar points out, Poinsot ranks theological conclusions derived from mixed principles (i.e., one held from faith and another known naturally) as entirely equal to those derived from two principles held by faith: which is to say, theology is just one science.[56] This view marks an important distinction between Poinsot and other late scholastic Thomists such as Domingo Báñez,[57] Molina,[58] and Granados[59] who held that conclusions derived from mixed principles were not as elevated as those from two principles held by faith. Poinsot, in contrast, thinks that the mixed principles are united in the one faith and are on an equal footing with those conclusions derived from two principles held



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by faith, for even in the latter case they lead to a truth that is virtually revealed (more on this below).[60] "It is necessary that from each [premise: one from faith one natural] one medium is formed, just as in all other syllogisms: since the inferred conclusion from two premises is attained by a single [*unico*] judgment and assent, and consequently by a single light or medium which is forged by both premises".[61]

In answer to the second question regarding the formal character under which (*ratio formalis sub qua*), Poinsot identifies that character in terms of 'virtual revelation' (*revelatio virtualis*). To make sense of 'virtual revelation' Poinsot notes that, for Thomas, scripture concerns those things that are divinely revealed, which is to say, those things are "immediately revealed" (*immedite revelata*) and believed by faith. As Congar puts it, "The term *virtualiter revelatum* is defined exclusively as a truth not formally revealed, but deduced from Revelation by a correct process of reasoning".[62] That is, theology considers not only such *revelabilia* made known immediately through revelation, but also, since as a science it is discursive, that which is "virtually or potentially revealed" (*virtualiter seu in potentia revelata*).[63] "The term virtualiter revelatum is defined exclusively as a truth not formally revealed, but deduced from Revelation by a correct process of reasoning".[64] Theology deduces what is (virtually) contained within the data of revelation and makes explicit what was only embryonic: "virtual revelation, that is, virtual containment of conclusions in the principles of the faith, which are formally revealed, is the reason for assenting to the conclusions, as they are inferred from such principles".[65]

# VI Theology as a Natural Science

Since theology pertains to virtual revelation and, in some cases, involves a premise known by a natural light, how should one regard the nature of theology itself? That is, is sacred theology properly a supernatural or natural science? One might argue that, insofar as theology is concerned with supernatural objects (i.e., God) in a supernatural way, it is a supernatural science.[66] This would seem to be true even in those cases wherein one of the principles is known naturally, for not all concurring causes producing a



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supernatural reality need themselves be supernatural. While a perfect act of contrition, for example, comes about through an act of the will, more importantly, it proceeds from divine assistance resulting in a supernatural act.[67] Poinsot disagrees with this notion. Faith—more specifically faith in the revelatory data—might communicate certitude to theology, but it does not thereby render it supernatural for the reason that faith itself does not produce the theological *habitus*. While the objects of theology might be supernatural, theology itself deals (*negotietur*) with such supernatural objects by means of a *natural* reasoning process (*discursus*) more or less facilitated by one's own intellectual talents, labor, and industry.[68] This is true even in those cases wherein both premises are from supernatural faith. The connection obtaining between both premises and the conclusion inferred therefrom is something that is itself formally attained through natural means.[69]

For Poinsot, "our theology which is acquired by our acts is a habit of the natural order".[70] True enough, it might be assisted by a "supernatural infused theology" (*theologia infusa supernaturale*), given by the Holy Spirit, but such a gift is "freely given" (*gratis datam*). Thus, the latter type of theology is different in kind from that which is a product of the natural order and attained through study (*per studium*). What is given by the Holy Spirit is instead attained through infusion (*per infusam*) and not through the acquisitive results of our own natural powers.[71] But whatever is acquired through our own powers—here, study—is in fact a human science. Now, establishing the natural status of sacred theology involves considering what is required to attain a *habitus* and how that relates specifically to theology.

Regarding the first, Poinsot argues that no *habitus* can be supernatural precisely for the reason that it is attained through one's own natural labors. What is more, if theology were supernatural, it would be lost anytime the theologian committed grave sin through which sanctifying grace is lost. But this is not the case, nor is it the case that every faithful person is a theologian, which would be the case if theology were supernaturally given through faith.[72] Rather, "through the exercise and labor of theological study, something is acquired in our intellect, by which we perceive and know something that before we did not know".[73] But any habit that is acquired, such as theological science, requires natural causes that it may be attained, just as any



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supernatural effect would require supernatural causes. Yet a supernatural cause would exceed the natural order and could never be attained through our own efforts as theology is.[74]

Furthermore, Poinsot holds that while it is the case that some truths can only be known supernaturally (i.e., through revelation) on account of which one gives assent, what follows from those supernatural truths deductively is accessible to our natural reasoning process. Again, this is just the nature of theology as virtual revelation, which involves a *natural* reasoning process. "The formal character of acquired theology is virtual revelation, insofar as it is attained through the strength of the connection and consequence which is deduced from some formally revealed truth".[75] Additionally, it is the same logic governing the reasoning in other (natural) sciences that directs our scientific reasoning in theology. "Therefore supernatural things treated in the manner of the science of metaphysics, and inferred by natural discourse, generate a scientific habit in the natural order, since the mode of knowing and discursive reasoning is natural".[76]

# VII Theology's Certitude

Though sacred theology is, to Poinsot's mind, a natural science, its certitude, even as it exists in us and not just in God or the blessed, is greater than all natural certitude arising from the other sciences. For his part, Thomas Aquinas argues that sacred theology is more certain than all the other sciences (1) because of the excellence of its subject matter (viz., God) and (2) because, while all the natural sciences are made certain through a natural light, the conclusions of theology are made certain through a supernatural light.[77] Poinsot follows suit and holds that theology is more certain than all the natural sciences with respect to its "formal character", that is to say, with respect to how our intellect grasps the truth of some object. The reason for this claim is that theology, like any other science, resolves its conclusions into its principles. Whereas other sciences are such that their principles stem from a natural light, the principles of theology are the articles of faith, which are more certain since they are known through a supernatural light.[78] This is true even in the case when one of the principles from which a



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theological conclusion is derived is natural. Once again, Poinsot holds that the natural principle is elevated and perfected by the premise that derives from the faith. Serving then to infer a theological conclusion in concert with a principle that stems from faith, the natural premise attains a certitude that exceeds what is known merely by a natural light.[79] In essence, the certitude of theology, like the principles from which it takes its point of departure, ultimately stems from God. Since it derives from a completely immutable and infallible cause (God) the certainty that it bears is likewise unsurpassed by other natural sciences.[80]

Nevertheless, Poinsot grants that, on the part of the believing subject, theology might be less certain than other sciences because its evidence might not be equally as accessible to our intellect. This is not to suggest that, in itself, theology is less certain. Rather, since certitude follows upon grasping some evidence, if the evidence is objectively lacking, then there will be a lack of certitude. Now, for Poinsot, there is no lack of objective certitude since God has, through revelation, guaranteed the certitude of the revelatory data. What is more, if sound reasoning is used to infer conclusions from that revelatory data, then theological conclusions would, again, have in themselves greater certitude than natural sciences. Yet, if evidence is subjectively lacking, not because of some kind of defect in the object but because of our intellectual weakness, then the conclusions derived may well lack the same degree of certitude that natural sciences possess.[81] Poinsot further explains: "the certitude of science immediately begins and is taken from the object, since it is seen; but the certitude of faith [is by] mediation of the will, which is touched by a divine motion prior to the intellect, for the will should move the intellect so as to believe and be determined to assent".[82]

Interestingly, Poinsot not only raises the question of whether the certitude pertaining to theology is greater than that of the natural sciences, but also whether it is greater than that which pertains to those sciences' own natural first principles. Once again, he answers 'yes'. Whereas knowledge of natural first principles, such as the principle of noncontradiction, derives from the natural light, the first principles of theology derive from the supernatural light of divine revelation which, unlike human knowledge, can never be deceived or in error.[83] Indeed, as he says, no matter how self-evident a



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natural principle may be, it is also reducible to some sensible experience. As such, they always have an origin in particularity from which some 'induction' (*inductio*) must be made in order to arrive at a universal principle. Even if that induction is well performed, Poinsot thinks that, insofar as it depends upon a sensory origin, "it is always of itself subject to fallacy and deception, to which the senses are capable".[84] Nevertheless, he adds that "the certitude of natural principles can be corrected and certified through divine revelation, both with respect to their universality, and with respect to the cause whence they accept their certitude, namely, inasmuch as they are induced by the senses; since revelation is accepted from divine revelation, which is more universal and more certain than all".[85]

# VIII Conclusion

Without a doubt, Poinsot reflected profoundly upon the theological speculations that were bequeathed to him by Thomas Aquinas. As the contents of the second disputation of his *Cursus theologicus* testify, Poinsot's reflections were mediated by the living scholastic tradition that either embraced, challenged, or developed Thomas's theses regarding the scientific nature of theology. Here, the Portuguese Thomist confronted diverse interpretations not only of the *schola Thomistarum* but also the *recentiores* and non-Thomists. Was Poinsot merely a parrot of Thomas? By no means. As we have seen especially with respect to the notion of virtual revelation and the utilization of natural principles in theological science, Poinsot took what was only *virtually* contained within the all-too brief theological expositions of Thomas and rendered it explicit. I have no doubt, then, that Poinsot was both confident and entirely sincere when he claimed upon his deathbed—as noted above—that everything he had written was, as he judged it, in conformity with the mind and doctrine of Thomas. And, just like Thomas, Poinsot went to his eternal reward well before the natural duration of earthly life should have permitted. The blaze of his intellect, twice as bright as lesser men, seemingly burnt out twice as fast.



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# Notes

[1]Poinsot, *Cursus philosophicus* (Paris-Tournai-Rome: Desclée et Socii, 1931), tome 1, xii: "... nunquam triginta annorum spatio aut scripsisse aut docuisse quod veritati consonum, atque Angelico Doctori conforme non judicaret..."

[2]Pereira, *Suárez: Between Scholasticism and Modernity* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2007), 58-65.

[3]They did so at least in outline form. Certain treatises, namely, musings on astronomy, were left out. This might have been because of Poinsot's uneasiness regarding such speculations in light of the troubles with ecclesiastical authorities that some, such as Galileo, had.

[4]See Pierre Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et l'averroïsme latin au XIIIème siècle; étude critique et documents inédits*, 2 vols. (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de L'Université, 1908, 1911).

[5]Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.4; cf. *Metaphysics* 3.2.997a1-15.

[6]See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1.9981a27-982b1; idem., 4.1.

[7]See Thomas Aquinas, *In Boetium de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4.

[8]For Albertus's effort at constructing a scientific theology, see his *Summa theologiae sive de mirabilis scientia Dei*, tract. 1, q. 1 (ed., D. Siedler, W. Kübel, H.G. Vogels, *Opera omnia*, Cologne edition, vol. 34.1 [Münster, 1978]). Thomas's thinking on the matter will be discussed presently.

[9]Thomas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 1.

[10]Poinsot, *Cursus theologicus* [hereafter *CT*], q. 1 (39): "...quod nomine doctrinae et disciplinae intelligit Aristotelis ...*cognitionem probativam alicujus, sive scientificae, sive probabiliter*". In what follows I make exclusive use of the Solesmes 1931 edition of this text. All page references given in parentheses will be to the first volume of the *CT*.

[11]See Doyle, *John of St. Thomas (Poinsot) on Sacred Science*: Cursus theologicus I, *question 1, Disputation*, ed. Victor M. Salas (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2023), 26.

[12]See Thomas Aquinas, *In Boetius de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4. In that passage Thomas himself marks the identity between what Christian theologians call 'natural theology' and what the (pagan) philosophers called 'metaphysics'. The difference seems to be one of hermeneutic horizon rather than object.

[13]*CT*, d. 2, a. 1, n. 1 (347): "[...] quia de Deo in se ipso non possumus cognoscere aliquid nisi per revelationem divinam, et non ex creaturis..."

[14]Ibid., d. 2, a. 1, n. 1 (347): "[...] ita quod fides respicit immediate revelata, theologia autem illata ex illis, quae dicitur revelata mediate seu vitualiter".

[15]Ibid., d. 2, a. 3, n. 1.

[16]Ibid., n. 4 (353): "...ad scientiam enim nihil amplius requiritur, quam quod sit cognitio certa et evidens per illationem".

[17]Ibid., n. 4.



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[18]Ibid. (353): "...sed sufficit eminentalis, et ex parte objecti: sicut salvatur in Angelis, immo in ipso Deo, vera et propria scientia, sine imperfectione vel metaphora..."

[19]Ibid.

[20]For Thomas's express treatment of this point, see his *In Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 4; *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 11; *De potentia Dei*, q. 7, a. 7, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 5. Interestingly, Poinsot passes over question 13 of the *prima pars* the locus classicus for Thomas's discussion of the analogical character of the divine names. He simply points his readers to his *Cursus philosophicus, Logica*, pars II, q. 13, aa. 3-5 where he offers an extended treatment of analogy following along lines similar to Cajetan. I am baffled by Hieromonk Gregory Hrynkiw's claim, then, that Poinsot regards human *scientia* as univocal such that theology's subalternate character is "obscured". Poinsot maintains quite the opposite. See Hrynkiw, *Cajetan on Sacred Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 121.

[21]*CT*, d. 2, a. 3, n. 5.

[22]In his own discussion, Thomas Aquinas suggests that optics is reduced to geometry and that music is reduced to mathematics. See Thomas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 2.

[23]*CT*, d. 2, a. 3, n. 6.

[24]Ibid., n. 7.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]*De ver.*, q. 14, a. 9.

[28]*CT*, d. 2, a. 3, n. 12.

[29]Ibid., n. 8 (354): "...scientia subalternata solum ex natura sua petit evidentiam praesuppositam, et factam ab alia scientia, non vero per se illam facit..."

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid., n. 11.

[32]Ibid., n. 13.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Of course, theology in the fullest sense would be such that both the major and minor premises involve articles of faith. Poinsot does allow, however, that one of the premises may originate from our natural knowledge. This would render theology, despite its divine subject matter, a truly *human* science. I shall discuss this more in what follows.

[35]*CT* , d. 2, a. 4, n. 4.

[36]Ibid. (357): "...quia omnis certitudo quae habetur per consequentiam et discursum, non est immediate assensus fidei..."

[37]Ibid. (358): "...sed testimonio Spiritus Sancti, et non solum quia sic nobis videtur, sed quia sic *visum est Spiritui Sancto*..."

[38]Ibid. (358): "...ergo tunc solum theologia erit scientia, quando ex pricipiis fidei per consequentiam evidentem procedit..."

[39]Ibid., n. 5.

[40]Ibid.



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[41]Ibid., n. 6.

[42]Ibid., n. 7 (358): "...quia veritas ab Ecclesia definita tamquam de fide proponitur omnibus ut credatur, ita ut qui illam negaret esset haereticus directe et formaliter; ergo talis veritas immediate est de fide, et non conclusio theologica".

[43]Ibid., a. 6, n. 1. (369): "...'omnis homo est risibilis; Christus est homo; ergo Christus est risibilis'".

[44]Congar, *A History of Theology*, trans. Hunter Guthrie (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1968), 158.

[45]Thomas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

[46]*CT*, d. 2, a. 6, n. 16.

[47]Thomas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, c. 1; idem, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 6.

[48]*CT*, d. 2, a. 6, n. 6 (370): "... sapientia non solum utitur principiis indemonstrabilibus, sive propriis sive alienis, deducendo conclusiones ex eis, sed etiam judicando de illis et disputando contra negantes ipsa".

[49]Ibid., n. 7 (370): "...in inferendis illis conclusionibus ita utitur sapientia principiis inferioribus, quod tamen formaliter semper reducitur ad superiorem rationem sapientiae, a qua principia inferiora perficiuntur, id est, judicantur et approbantur et defenduntur..."

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., n. 10.

[52]Ibid., n. 11.

[53]Ibid., n. 8 (370): "...quocumque autem modo ponatur, non subordinatur illi praemissae naturali, quia non respicit illam ut principium perfectivum sui in quantum naturalis est, sed potius ut perfectam et elevatam a se".

[54]Ibid., a. 7, n. 7 (376): "...quia talis conclusio illata non est immediate de fide tamquam credita, sed per discursum cognoscitur ut illata; ergo non respicit immediate revelatum, sed ex revelatis deductum, quod est virtualiter revelatum".

[55]Ibid.

[56]Congar, *A History of Theology*, 159.

[57]Báñez, *Scholastica commentariam in primam partem Angelici Doctoris* (Salamanca, 1585), q. 1, a. 3.

[58]Molina, *Commentaria in primam partem divi Thomae* (Venice, 1602), q. 1, a. 3, disp. 3.

[59]Granados, *Commentarii in primam partem Summae theologicae S. Thomae* (Hispali, 1623), disp. 3, sec. 1.

[60]*CT* d. 2, a. 7, n. 21.

[61]*CT*, d. 2, a. 7, n. 20 (381): "...sed tamen oportere quod ex utraque fiat unicum medium, sicut in aliis omnibus syllogismis: siquidem conclusio illata ex duabus praemissis unico judico et assensu attingitur, et consequenter unico lumine seu medio ex utraque praemissa conflato".

[62]Ibid.

[63]*CT*, d. 2, a. 7, a. $11^{bis}$.



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[64]Congar, *A History of Theology*, 159.

[65]*CT*, d. 2, a. 7, a. 11 (377): "...revelatio virtualis, id est, continentia virtualis conclusionum in principiis fidei, quae sunt formaliter revelata, est ratio assentiendi conclusionibus, ut illata ex talibus principiis..."

[66]Ibid., d. 2, a. 8, a. 1.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid., d. 2, a. 8, n. 8.

[69]Ibid., n. 15.

[70]Ibid., d. 2, a. 8, n. 3 (385): "...theologiam nostris actibus acquisitam esse habitum ordinis naturalis..."

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid., n. 4.

[73]Ibid. (385): "Nam per exercitum et laborem studii theologici, aliquid acquiritur in nostro intellectu, quo percipimus et cognoscimus aliquid quod antea non cognoscebamus".

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid., n. 11 (388): "...ratio formalis theologiae acquisitae est virtualiter revelatum, quatenus attingiur ex vi connexionis et consequentiae deductae ex aliqua veritate formaliter revelata".

[76]Ibid., n. 6 (386): "Itaque res supernaturales ad modum metaphysicae scientiae tractatae, et discursu naturali collatae, generant habitum scientificum naturalis ordinis, quia modus sciendi et discurrendi naturalis est".

[77]Ibid., d. 2, a. 9, n. 2; cf. Thomas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 5.

[78]Ibid., n. 5.

[79]Ibid., n. 6.

[80]Ibid., n. 8.

[81]Ibid., n. 9.

[82]Ibid. (392): "certitudo scientiae immediate incipit et desumitur ab objecto, quia videtur; certitudo vero fidei mediante voluntate, quae prius tangitur a motione divina, quam intellectus, eo quod voluntas debet movere intellectum ut credat et determinetur ad assentiendum..."

[83]Ibid., n. $9^{bis}$.

[84]Ibid. (392): "...semper de se subest fallacie et deceptioni, cujus sensus sunt capaces".

[85]Ibid. (393): "...ideo certitudo principiorum naturalium corrigi potest et certificare per divinam revelationem, tam quoad suam universalitatem, quam quoad causam unde accipitur eorum certitudo, scilicet quantum ad inductionem sensuum: quia revelatio accipitur a divina scientia, quae universalior et certior est omnibus".



https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11164730
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